

THE SKITTERLEAP

By enabee

Summary: For fifty years, since the defeat of Albus Dumbledore, Grindlewald has ruled his empire with an iron fist, his armies crushing all those who would oppose him. Harry Potter, born into a world where power is everything and true friends are few and far between finds himself caught up in an inextricable web of lies, soldiers and personal vendettas that leaves the fate of the world in his own two hands.

A/N: There's a chance that this will be the largest and most comprehensive AU you will read. It's not me blowing my own trumpet, it's a warning. Most of what happens here bares little or no relation to canon. Characters, however, hopefully fit true to form even if particular qualities have been singled out and enhanced. This will be my last warning on the subject; don't read this if you don't like hugely AU worlds.

Prologue

It was the merest of faint rustles that woke him. A beautiful sound; the staccato crackle of leaves brushing together, caught by the whim of an early morning breeze.

It was the sound of freedom.

As he lay, still partially captive to the beguilement's of sleep, he found that as he listened, the sound changed. What at first had been little more than the rustle of the wind was now accompanied by the occasional bar of bird song and somewhere far off, a child's laugh.

For a moment, he thought he'd imagined it. Indeed, the sound was so faint he half believed his ears had been playing tricks on him. Yet, again he heard it, louder.

Slowly and deliberately he eased himself up from the thin mattress. His joints protested as he lifted himself from the bed, aching from their long stretch in such an uncomfortable resting place. Though he

had long accepted that he was no longer young, he couldn't help but feel a slight shame in his weakness.

Death he could rationalise. Weakness was a much harder blow to his ego.

Dumbledore sat on the end of his bed, his feet, despite the length of his legs, barely touched the floor. His eyes found the barred window and he smiled slightly at the warm sunlight that spilled through and on to the floor of his cell.

Lifting his long, broken nose upward, Dumbledore sniffed appreciatively at the air. The breeze that crept through the bars of his cell brought with them the slightest aroma of honeysuckle. Summer had finally arrived, he deduced. He was glad, as it had, for some time now, been long overdue.

Finally he rose, pushing his tired feet into a pair of threadbare slippers to avoid the cold stone floor. Seeing no reason to rush, he languidly strolled to the window and peered out in interest.

Beyond the window he could see the Johanna Park as it stretched off toward the banks of the Pleisse. Rich groves dotted the vast expanse of grassland that teemed with people enjoying the Sunday sun.

For a moment, Dumbledore merely stood and enjoyed the feeling of the sun on his face, angling his bristled jaw to best catch the few rays that made it between the bars.

Today was a fine day to die.

Dumbledore allowed several minutes to pass like this before he tired of it. He turned neatly on his heels and crossed the room once more, this time to the low sink and mirror.

He sadly noted, as he did every morning, the short stubble that covered his face. It was a petty worry, he knew, but he had long ago accepted death as an inevitable end to his imprisonment. Dignity seemed such a small ask.

His blue eyes had not lost any of their lustre, he noted. They still sparkled and shone in the early morning light with as much intensity

as they had when he was a boy. The rest of his face, on the other hand, was a different matter.

His imprisonment had not been kind to him, these twenty-five years. His complexion, once youthful and somewhat handsome, was now pale and gaunt. His eyes were deep set and ringed by dark skin. His skin was showing the signs of neglect; deep wrinkles had appeared where, if he had not been so neglected, there ought not to be.

He was disturbed however by the sound of footsteps climbing the stairs to his room in the top of the Neues Rathaus tower. In a moment, those footsteps would be replaced by the jangle of keys in the lock of his door.

Any moment now his jailer would enter the room with a cup of tea. It was a matter of long established routine that Dumbledore for his part despised. Uniform repetition and routine was something that Dumbledore detested in all forms. It was one of the things he hated most about his imprisonment.

The door swung open, but for once it was not the jailer that was stood in the doorway.

"Hello Albus."

"Ah Gellert, do take a seat," replied Dumbledore, as though greeting an errant pupil.

The man who now called himself Emperor remained in the doorway, so Dumbledore sat on the edge of his bed instead and examined him.

The years had been kinder to Grindelwald than Dumbledore. Indeed, he had not been imprisoned for twenty-five years. Some of his golden blond hair still remained amongst patches of silver and his face still retained its old handsomeness. The life, however, that had been bursting from his every pore was absent.

Gellert Grindelwald had matured impressively.

Dumbledore allowed his eyes to drift from his old friend and to stare out of the window. He swallowed and began to hum the faintest of melodies as he sat.

"What can I do for you, old friend?" asked Dumbledore finally.

"Give me an excuse," replied Grindelwald, not unkindly.

Dumbledore turned his head and considered him for a moment, and then he smiled sadly.

"Gellert, I will never fathom how your mind works," said Dumbledore.

Grindelwald opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore cut across him, proving that even now, a prisoner, he was in the position of authority.

"I won't give you an excuse," he said scathingly. "For your actions are inexcusable."

Grindelwald flushed a deep puce, betraying his frustration.

"Even in the face of death you are as proud as ever, Albus," he snapped. "Can you not even concede your beliefs for one moment?"

"No," replied Dumbledore stoically.

"Not even to save your life?"

Dumbledore looked at him in astonishment. Then he laughed merrily.

"I have no fear of death," he said incredulously. "In fact, I dare say I may rather enjoy it."

Grindelwald stared at his old friend for a long time, the anger in his eyes fading to a deep sadness. Dumbledore merely peered back at him, completely unperturbed.

"Then forgive me, at least," said Grindelwald.

"You know I shall."

Grindelwald turned to leave, but Dumbledore called after him.

"Gellert."

Grindelwald turned, hope momentarily in his eyes, but at Dumbledore's stony expression, it faded.

"You will die," said Dumbledore quietly. "I have foreseen it."

Grindelwald's entire being changed in that instant, he stood taller and more upright, his jaw clenched and his eyes flashed menacingly.

"Oh?" he asked, fury resonating through his voice.

"Yes," replied Dumbledore, with no more ill-intent than ever. "And I hope for your sake, they kill you in your sleep and do not humiliate you as you have done to me."

Gellert Grindelwald stared at him, and then laughed heartily.

"You are not a seer," he scoffed.

"I do not have to be," replied Dumbledore. "You yourself will create your own worst enemy. You know yourself that one day; one amongst the people you oppress will stand up and strike back. It is only a matter of time."

Grindelwald took these words as a blow, almost visibly reeling from them. Then he tightened his face once more and sneered at Dumbledore.

"And I will kill them all. Each as they come to me," he said.

Dumbledore laughed again, but this time it was an icy, pitying laugh.

"I wish I had known you for the fool you are, Gellert," he chortled. "I surely would not have lost our duel."

Grindelwald pulled his wand and levelled it at Dumbledore, his irate breathing heavy. His entire body shook in unrestrained anger. For a moment Dumbledore thought he might kill him where he sat, but after a moment, Grindelwald lowered his wand and replaced it. A slight tinge reached his cheeks, embarrassment for having been so easily goaded.

"I will see you in an hour Albus," he said and turned away. He paused momentarily in the door. "I shall have some robes sent up."

With that he left, slamming and locking the door behind him. Dumbledore stared at the door for a moment, half hoping he would return. Then with a sigh, leant back on his bed and looked up at the stone ceiling.

Right now at Hogwarts, in the first days of summer, the children would be sat around the lake. Skimming enchanted stones perhaps, or maybe chasing the snitch across the water, flying low enough for their feet to trace the surface.

Dumbledore had intended to return to Hogwarts after the war. To devote his life to teaching the future of the world, to guide them, to prevent them from becoming as errant as he. He would have had the Headmaster's position in as little as three years and he'd long planned his changes to the curriculum.

"The best laid plans," he murmured aloud.

A moment later he heard the keys jangle in the lock again. Dumbledore rose, half expecting for Grindelwald to return. When the door opened, it was not Grindelwald who entered, but his jailer, carrying a large mug of tea.

Dumbledore smiled.

"How are you today, Alphard?" he asked kindly.

"A fair sight better than you," replied Alphard cheekily, then winked at Dumbledore. "I brought you a couple of extra biscuits."

"Will you join me?"

"I always do," chortled Alphard as he handed Dumbledore the mug and sat beside him on the bed. "How's tricks?"

"Much the same as ever," replied Dumbledore, sipping his tea appreciatively. "Though I dare say Gellert plans to kill me today."

"Aye, I heard as much," said Alphard, much of his sunny disposition gone at that statement. "But you've had a long innings, eh?"

"Not quite as long as I should have liked," said Dumbledore, a smile on his lips.

Silence reigned between them for a moment then Dumbledore started slightly.

"Please, forgive my manners. How are your family?" he asked.

Alphard snorted as though Dumbledore had said something hilarious.

"Walburga is still being a miserable ole sow," he said happily. "Cygnus married Druella Rosier in the end. Oh and young Sirius starts Hogwarts in September."

"The one who set Orion on fire?" asked Dumbledore in amusement.

"Aye," replied Alphard. "He's a funny little 'un."

Alphard sat with Dumbledore a while and chatted aimlessly. Dumbledore for his part listened intently while he considered the strange little man.

There had never been any malice from Alphard, or even slight unkindness. The first day Dumbledore had been imprisoned here, Alphard had brought him a cup of tea and blathered aimlessly on and it had continued much the same ever since. Over the years they had established a firm friendship, with Alphard bringing him news of the outside world in exchange for a kind ear.

Previous to his incarceration, Dumbledore had known Alphard Black by reputation only, the young man having attended Durmstrang. But what he knew of the man told him he was not to be underestimated, a more savage or skilled wand couldn't be found for miles around.

Unless of course, the stories he'd heard of Tom Riddle were true.

Eventually Alphard and Dumbledore were joined by three other wizards, each of which Dumbledore had known well during his time here. They all wore official robes and long, grave faces. He smiled kindly around at them all and was guided down the long spiral staircase.

As each step brought him closer to his fate, a little touch of apprehension crept into Dumbledore. The slightest of fears, but it was present. Yet a smile snuck on to his face, a wide smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth until he began to chuckle.

Alphard looked at him as though he were crazy. Dumbledore shook his head in merriment.

"I am afraid," he admitted. "It seems my life was not wasted after all."

They stopped at the bottom of the staircase; it was almost pitch black at the bottom of the tower. Dumbledore could barely make out the huge oak doors that separated him from the gallows. After taking a deep breath to steel himself, Dumbledore turned to Alphard once last time and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"Goodbye, I truly couldn't have asked for a greater friend."

His jailer scoffed but Dumbledore could see the unformed tears in his eyes.

"How about one that isn't going to hang you."

"We each owe a death, Alphard, there are no exceptions," replied Dumbledore and then he turned, his eyes gleaming in mirth. "Though I suppose I've never done very well for friends."

With that, Dumbledore pushed the doors open and stepped out into the sunlight.

Chapter I

It was cold in Leipzig this winter. It was always fucking cold in Leipzig. Even under the unforgiving blaze of the summer sun Leipzig would always be cold. Not for the first time today I asked why I was over half a thousand miles from home, in a place even the gods had forsaken.

As I passed through the huge Gothic arch, a nauseating lurch of fear leapt through my stomach. I stepped hastily between two of the city's silent, foreboding guards, their cold stinging my face, the awful rattling breath sending shivers down my spine. I forced thoughts of mother to the forefront of my mind, let them try and feast on those if they dared.

It took me about half a second to sweep past them and I took another few steps before allowing myself to shudder in disgust. I'd always thought them foul creatures from afar. But now, in Leipzig, where they lurk on every street corner, feasting off the city's inhabitants like some multi-headed parasitic worm, I'd begun to actively loath them.

They were very effective police though; this was something even I had to admit. There was no crime in Leipzig, none, not at all. Dementors don't need to investigate, ask questions or prove guilt because they can smell it, literally. They can smell your guilt from three hundred feet away and it doesn't matter if your crime was murder or shoplifting, they'll take your soul for it.

I crossed the courtyard, snow crunching beneath my boots and blowing across my face. My uniform fluttered about me, tuchrock and shirt stuck fast to my body by the driving wind and snow. I'd forgotten that the magical suspension went up across the city today, all my impervious and warming charms for naught because of one fucking politician. Dementors, are apparently not enough to protect the almighty Lord Riddle, yet they suffice the whole year round with the Austro-Hungarian Emperor in permanent residence.

I'd never considered Riddle as much of a wizard, even though there are a hundred war stories told in the taverns about Riddle in North Africa. Stories of how he single handedly brought down the French wards around al-Jazair, how he spearheaded the muggle capture Tobruk as a nineteen year old ex-Hogwarts student caught up in

thick of it and how, in the most unbelievable tale of all, how he toppled Lord Arlington, a wizard three score his senior, atop the Scharnhorst in the midst of the Battle of North Cape, in a duel of epic proportions.

Though these stories were told, hand on heart by survivors, I couldn't help but wonder why a glorious war hero; champion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the wizard who spent the better part of his youth fighting against his own country, now exhausted his days skulking at his master's feet.

I knocked upon the door of Pucey's office and waited politely. Patience was a virtue with a CO like Pucey. He was only two years older than I and barely a captain, but acted with all the dignity and fondness for military doctrine and etiquette that you would expect from a sixty year old general.

After a brief pause, during which the wind howled louder than ever, I heard a sharp command from Pucey to enter. I was halfway through the door when I saw Lord Riddle standing before me. His tall, athletic frame was instantly recognizable, even from behind as he looked into the fire. I paused for a moment to concentrate again on my thoughts of mother, pushing them to the forefront of my mind once more. Though I doubted the veracity of Riddle's war stories, I knew him to be a formidable legilimens, he wouldn't be head of the SS if he weren't and I certainly didn't want him to know what I'd just been thinking.

Pucey looked up at me from behind his desk and beckoned me to sit before him. I did as he indicated, a neutral expression on my face, but behind my carefully constructed façade of memories, my mind raced in a blind panic. Was this some sort of reprimand? Was Riddle here to arrest me on the basis of some imagined slight? I was in such a state of inner turmoil that I didn't even notice the fourth person in the room for two whole minutes.

Sat in the farthest corner from the fire was someone I recognized instantly; Viktor Krum. Somewhat of a prodigy, he was the youngest graduate from Belton's in the sixteen years of its existence. He'd shown a natural talent for leadership and a prodigious magical skill and had flown upwards through the ranks like an arrow, playing a pivotal role in turning back the American landings in Iceland as well as organizing the haphazard defense on the banks of the Nile,

slowing the Moorish attack on Egypt long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

Unfortunately for him, like an arrow, too soon he'd hit the highpoint of his career and begun the descent back to earth. Approximately four months ago, Krum had been leading a standard reconnaissance mission across the Nile when he'd spotted around two hundred and fifty men moving in formation. It was dark and he must've been up for three or four days and suspecting the men were a Moorish night time raiding company, he and his men opened fire and slaughtered them.

It was not until the next day that the dreadful truth was realized; he'd butchered an entire company of POW's, captured in the early attack. Afterwards, he'd been sent to watch over a small rural area of Britain, away from the fighting and hadn't seen action since.

He glowered at me from the corner, his dark eyes reflecting the dim flickering light that reached him from the fire. He looked thinner than I remembered from the papers. His face was gaunt and his eyes were dark and sunken. He rose unsteadily into a duck-footed walk and drew closer to the desk. Closer inspection told me that Krum was clearly unwell, his skin was pale and blotchy, he had dark bags under his eyes and his face looked like he'd been starved.

He sat to the left of Pucey in an uncomfortable looking wooden chair and after a few moments, I could distinctly smell the odour of stale vodka. Pucey clearly noticed too, because he gave Krum a deadly glare before training his eyes on Riddle. After a moment the older man removed himself from the fire's warmth and came to sit on Pucey's other side. I dared a glance in his direction and our eyes met instantly. I stared for a moment into those unfathomable eyes before looking at the floor. Riddle spoke first.

"Nervous are you?" he asked, not unkindly, but neither warmly. He sounded a bit like a gruff school teacher. I was surprised, I'd been told he was a charismatic and eloquent man, yet at the moment he just seemed a bit surly.

"Well, it's not very often one gets summoned into a room with two high ranking officers and the head of the SS, is it?" I asked and immediately regretted it, but Riddle apparently found my sarcasm amusing and laughed. Pucey gave me a look that was half

reproachful and half contemptuous and Krum remained enigmatic, silent and pissed.

"True, true," said Riddle, his eyes now alight with an emotion I couldn't place. It seemed to be a cross of happiness and expectation and was distinctly unsettling. "Well you don't have to be afraid of me, Leutnant. The tales of my exploits of war are greatly exaggerated," he announced, smiling very broadly. I couldn't think what had happened that would put him in such a good mood; moments ago he'd been surly. "It was only two divisions of British warlocks that I defeated singlehandedly, not five!" he chortled, I made an uncomfortable face.

"I've not heard that one before, sir," I said regretfully. His face fell slightly, like a child suddenly criticized for an imagined slight.

"Oh," he said, frowning. "Pity, that one's a corker." I gave him the widest smile I could whilst my heart was pounding like a drum inside my chest. I couldn't make head nor tail of this man stood before me. He'd always been portrayed to me as cold, calculating and ruthless not jovial and self-deprecating. Krum suddenly broke the silence.

"If we could get to business, gentleman," he said and the other two men nodded.

"Your name is Harry James Potter?" asked Pucey, I suddenly felt a little flash of annoyance, apparently Riddle did too because he looked at Pucey, an incredulous expression on his face.

"You're saying you don't recognize your XO of over a year?" he asked, harshly and Pucey flushed bright red.

"Of course I do, I'm just following procedure," he insisted and Riddle shrugged.

"Fine, carry on," he said nonchalantly and pointedly looked at the ceiling. Pucey glared at him for a moment and then looked down at the paper before him.

"You are not, to the best of your knowledge; under the effects of the Imperius curse, Polyjuice potion, Felix Felicis, Befuddlement Draught, Salvia Divinorum or Powdered Puffskein Extract?" asked Pucey, very seriously. I gaped at him, Riddle snorted and Krum's

hand lashed out, tearing the paper from Pucey's hand. He stood violently and looked angrily at the captain.

"You are a buffoon!" snapped the Bulgarian, looking very angry. "Do you really think that he is likely to answer yes to any of those questions? That he is going to admit that he is currently using a Polyjuice potion to impersonate himself?"

Pucey also stood abruptly, his face going an even deeper shade of red. "Now look here-" he began, but whatever he was going to say, he was cut off by an abrupt motion from Krum. In less than a second, the two had their wands directed at each other's faces. It was purely symbolic of course, neither could have done any magic if they'd wanted to but it was a sign of potential future violence. Riddle stood as well; his face equally as livid and I suddenly realised why all of those stories were told.

"Sit down, both of you," he said through his teeth, his words were very quiet but they tore at my insides like a pack of hungry wolves. Pucey and Krum both sat immediately, still glaring daggers at each other, but clearly cowed by Riddle's formidable presence. "Let's get this moving on, shall we?" asked Riddle in a normal voice. There was no humour present in his tone anymore and he directed a glance in my direction.

"You, Leutnant, are currently the XO of this training company, top ranked in all four major disciplines for your entire division and three Verdienstpunkte from a promotion to Oberleutnant. Correct?"

"Correct," I agreed but Pucey spoke up again.

"Potter is very modest; he is top ranked in all disciplines for the division and is currently top scored for in-flight leadership throughout any training program in Europe," he said authoritatively but sounded proud. Krum nodded and Riddle raised his eyebrow, apparently this was news to him.

"Very impressive," he acknowledged softly, though hesitantly. "I think I may regret this Potter, hearing this praise I wish I could snap you up into an SS division, as it is, you're hereby transferred to the Jagdgeschwader 26, you will serve as Krum's XO," he rose, abruptly and offered his hand to me. I stood hastily and shook it; he gave me a broad smile. "Congratulations Leutnant." And with that said he left

the room. Krum and Pucey rose to salute him and then Krum fixed me with a long, calculating stare.

"You have four hours to prepare your gear and say your goodbyes. I shall meet you here then," he said sharply and then left me alone with Pucey. He gave me a mournful look and sat down again.

"You've no idea what a blow it is to lose you," he informed me.

I gave him a small smile and shrugged. "Hauptmann Krum is one of the best, I'll learn a lot," I said, reverting back to our native English tongue, I knew it was important to him. He recognised the effort and returned my smile.

"He's a Major now; apparently if you murder three columns of your own infantry, they promote you," said Adrian bitterly and pulled the flask from his belt. He offered it to me first, but I shook my head. "It's good, Glenmorangie, not that awful firewhiskey stuff," he insisted, as though it might change my mind. He gave a sigh of resignation. "Suit yourself."

A pause lasted for almost a minute between us before I stood reluctantly and offered him my hand. "Look, it's been a real pleasure," I told him solemnly and he nodded his head in affirmation and shook my hand firmly. "Take care of yourself, sir."

These thirteen months of training, first at Belton, then in Leipzig, had been the longest year of my life. Both the physical and mental strain were beyond anything I could have imagined when I'd signed up halfway through my fifth year of Hogwarts. My Dad had been disappointed, said it wouldn't have been what Mum wanted, that he'd fought all those years ago so that I didn't have to, but in the end, I'd ignored him, just like I always had.

Now I was being transferred to a unit that would almost certainly see action within the year and to be honest, I was beginning to wish I'd listened to him. When I'd first made the decision, the last remnants of fighting in Egypt were coming to a halt. The world had lived through almost sixty years of warfare. First in mainland Europe, then the Northern countries in Africa. I had thought that the world was sick of fighting, that we'd settle into an uneasy, but untroubled peace.

As it happened, six months after I'd signed up, what remained of the Middle Eastern coalition had made a consolidated push into Egypt from the east, catching us unawares and triggering another bloodthirsty war. They'd got as far as the Nile Delta when Krum's counter attack had taken the wind from their sails. Four thousand Moors lay dead on the banks of the river by the end of the first day and they couldn't afford continuous losses to that extent so they'd become more cautious, probing and attacking suddenly before withdrawing again.

They were completely unable to find a weakness in our lines however and each time they attacked, we counter-attacked in force and pushed them further out of Egypt. The war was over within five months, an unconditional surrender from the Coalition Government and once again I'd been safe from war.

But for weeks now, there'd been trouble brewing on the Eastern Front, tiny skirmishes were being fought up and down no man's land when an enemy patrol would venture a little too close. It was by no means assured, but every day it looked more and more like there would be another war between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the USSR. International relationships were tense and the men stationed on the border were becoming increasingly uneasy and restless. Now, I was on my way to a unit stationed in Riga, within striking distance of both Moscow and Stalingrad. War was certainly afoot.

I'd packed my equipment and bade farewell to the men in two of the four hours allotted to me and so I decided to take a walk through the Friedenspark. It was still dreadfully cold and I was chilled to the bone. My charms still weren't working; the magical suspension hadn't been lifted, so Riddle was still in Leipzig somewhere. I stared out across the park, which on a summer's day would have been vibrant and alive, yet I saw nothing but bleak white snow. I wasn't sure where my new unit would take me, but I couldn't fucking wait to be out of this shit hole.

I met Krum on the corner outside the company headquarters, I had no desire to walk past the Dementors again and certainly had nothing more to say to Pucey; pretentious little shit that he was. His driver opened the door to his staff car and Krum beckoned me in without a word. I shoved my duffle bag on the back seat and sat

behind him. The door slammed shut behind me and the car pulled away.

I sat and watched the Company HQ until the car turned a corner and it was lost from sight. I sat and watched Leipzig as it sped past the windows, watched the driving snow and the dementors on the street corner. It was strange to think I'd spent only a month here. It had seemed like a hundred. After five minutes, I realised where the car was headed as we took a left onto Philipp-Rosenthal-Straße and I saw the Fridenspark for the second time that day. The old university was just ahead and that could only mean one thing; the Skitterleap. I swallowed in anticipation and we turned into the campus.

After having our identities thoroughly checked at a checkpoint half way down the road the staff car pulled up outside the Institute of Experimental Physics and I slowly extracted myself through the narrow door. The building was so typical of modern German architecture; long and rectangular and functional. The outer facade looked unkempt; the plaster above the front doors was stained and cracked and the cement walls looked dusty and weather beaten. Five years ago, it had been the pride of the Empire, state of the art, a place where miracles happened, the funding had probably dried up now, there were only half a dozen cars in the car park, the Skitterleap was probably the only department still active.

Krum took the stairs at a trot whilst I lagged apprehensively behind, still unsure if I even wanted to follow. All too soon I heaved against the heavy glass doors and stepped into the lobby. The huge room was empty, apart from Krum and I and completely bare. Not a scrap of paper, or a plant, or a chair. Just a bare white plaster room, with the words 'Institute of Experimental Physics' emblazoned on the far wall in gold lettering.

We took the lift to the third floor, Krum completely silent the entire way and my heart beating a tattoo against my chest. The Skitterleap was invented to fill a gap that until recently was void in magical transport. Although portkeys are accurate to a tee, the travel time is an exponential function of the portkey reach. Simply put; a portkey might deliver you perfectly a thousand miles across the planet but it might take you as long as three weeks. There is a famous story regarding Fargulch the Dolt, who attempted to portkey from Britain to Australia, only to appear unexpectedly in the Australian Ministry two and a half centuries later in a shower of rotten flesh.

Apparition on the other hand is almost instantaneous no matter how far you travel, but becomes increasingly more likely to deposit you a hundred miles out of your way, or far more worryingly; deposit parts of you a hundred miles from your destination. The Skitterleap is a combination of the two. The portkey pulls you in the right direction and the apparitions break up the journey into manageable chunks so that you don't find yourself lost in the ether. It is a perilous undertaking, you have to apparate ten times in ten seconds and if you are not one hundred percent focused, not one hundred percent locked on the drag of the portkey, you will find yourself ripped to shreds as your body tries to be in eleven different places at the same time. I'd seen this happen once before, it was very unpleasant and almost certainly fatal.

With this recollection at the forefront of my mind, we entered the Skitterleap chamber and was met by a harassed looking witch with awful hair. I barely gave her a second look, but Krum flushed as she strode over to him, her eyes wide and wearing a huge smile that showed two very prominent front teeth.

"Viktor!" she cried happily. "How are you?"

"Miss Hermy-own-ninny," he replied cordially, but with none of her enthusiasm. "I am well. Yourself?"

"Busy, busy, busy!" she exclaimed with a laugh that didn't quite suit her. "Are you my two o'clock?" she asked, sounding now very business-like, she caught sight of me and gave me a scowl that looked like it could have burned the flesh from my bones. "I hope you have your papers."

"Of course," said Krum, clearly relieved to be talking business again and handed her a wad of folded paper. She took the merest of glances through it and then looked at me.

"Harry James Potter?" she asked and I nodded in affirmation. "Are you the son of Lord Potter?" she asked again, I could tell from her tone that it was personal curiosity that fuelled the question, I nodded again and her expression softened. "Is this your first jaunt?" she continued, her eyes now alight with mischief.

"No, it will be my second."

"Ah well." She smiled. "Don't close your eyes."

I'd heard stories of second timers who'd closed their eyes to avoid the sights of the Skitterleap; it throws off the sense of direction, of reality and eventually breaks your concentration, leading to a liquidized wizard.

'Hermy-own-ninny' lead me over to the other side of the room, Krum traipsing half heartedly behind us. She put me in the middle of a circular grill set into the floor and handed me a small rubber disk. An awful smell reached my nostrils and between the cracks in the grate below I could see a dark liquid reflecting the powerful lights above. I swallowed nervously and tried to keep my eyes open the best I could, resisting the impulse to cower.

"Ready?" asked 'Hermy-own-ninny' but didn't even wait for a reply. "Three, two, one, go!"

I felt a powerful tug on my navel and in the same instant apparated. An awful crack echoed in my ears, but I ignored it and instead focused on the scene before me. I was hurtling through a terrible vortex of mist and though I could feel myself apparating, the scene before me never once changed. Mist roared past my eyes and ears and a terrible smell of burning flesh and brimstone was choking me. The light grey mist was darkening into an awful red colour and the creatures lurking in the mist began to take heed of my presence.

I could see their gleaming red eyes peering at me as I hurtled past. Terror clawed at my chest and I began to feel the desperate need to escape, to be clear of this place. Suddenly something lunged at me out of the mist, a dark shape with powerful jaws and sharp teeth and with my hands cemented to the rubber disk in my hand, I could do nothing to protect myself as it bit at my throat.

Then suddenly I was clattering to my knees on a firm floor, gasping down breaths of clean air, I put a hand to my throat, feeling for the tear in my throat and the gushing blood. There was nothing. I picked myself up and staggered away from the grill I'd landed upon, my head spinning, my entire body shaking. After a moment I looked around and saw a tall, broad figure looking down at me, an expression of concern on his face.

"Alright son?" he asked in stilted German.

"Perfectly fine," I said, in English and he smiled broadly.

"First time in a while?"

"Second time ever."

"You handled it well then; the second is always the worst. Two o'clock from Leipzig? Good, good. Come out of the way, your CO will be following any minute now."

I took a moment to straighten my uniform and watched jealously as Krum stepped through the Leap with a hiss and a flash, as though he'd merely walked from one room to another. He gave me a look up and down, if I looked as bad as I felt, I was probably a sight to be beheld.

"So you didn't wet yourself then?" he asked, a grim humour in his eyes, I bristled.

"You've got lipstick on your face," I snapped and he lifted a hand to his mouth and scrubbed before jerking at the door with his head.

"Come, I will show you to your quarters."

We took leave of the enormous man, who gave me a cheery wave before I left and entered into another lift. We emerged into a lobby as desolated as the one we'd left behind in Leipzig and stepped out into the driving rain. This time my warming and drying charms held up but even still I gasped as the freezing rain caught me in the face, even Krum made a noise of discontent.

He looked up and down the street for the staff car that should have been waiting and after a few moments gave a frustrated grunt and walked down the street. I took a look around myself, before following him and noted the skyline of ruined buildings, the cracked and pockmarked road surface and the smoke billowing from some inferno within the city. I hurried to catch up with Krum.

"This city looks like a fucking warzone. What the fuck is going on?" I asked, astounded at the level of devastation around me, had I missed something in those reports from the front?

"That's because we're at war, Oberleutnant, in all but name," replied Krum, matter-of-factly. I slowed and looked around in amazement; the city looked like London after the blitz. "Keep up," commanded Krum and I hurried again to follow him. We walked from the leap station around the corner onto the river front. I stared in dismay at the ruined city before me; Riga had once been a thriving city, with leafy avenues, climbing towers and bustling high streets.

Now, from the western side of the river, it appeared as though the Dom Cathedral was the building ablaze, its spire aflame as it reached to the sky. It was an awful sight to behold. I'd come here once as a child with my father, I'd loved the city, it was the perfect combination of civilisation and solitude. You could walk the streets and enjoy the shops and company, or you could lose yourself in the tree-lined backstreets and vast parks.

We crossed the Daugava on foot, via way of the north bridge, looking down river, it appeared that the southern and middle bridges had both been damaged; the nearest one in particular seemed to have collapsed haphazardly into the river. There seemed to be no civilians on the streets at all. We passed a great number of infantry, tanks, even the occasional officer or wizard, yet I didn't see a single civilian or civilian transport for the entire journey.

On the other side of the river we followed the Krisjana straight through the old part of the city, which appeared to be the most devastated section of all, especially with the awful skeletal trees lined up in a row along the pavement. We walked onwards to Elizabetes road. I hadn't been on this street since I was eleven, back then, the architecture had seemed superfluous and extravagant, to my eyes now, it was divine. The entire street had been crafted in some of the most exquisite Art Nouveau architecture I'd ever seen.

We followed the road, sticking tight to the tree lined left pavement, until we doubled back on ourselves, walking back toward the river and I suddenly realised that this was Krum's idea of a treat. He'd deliberately taken me out of our way to show us the sights and I could have hugged him. As we approached it, I instantly knew our destination; trust the officers of the Austro-Hungarian empire to commandeer the most luxurious hotel they could find in Riga.

The Monika was where I'd stayed with my father when he'd come here on business and I'd found it truly hideous, though I thought now that it may have been more my confinement to the building than a realistic opinion of its quality. A blockade of sandbags had been erected to block the road either side of the building and a mounted machinegun sat on each, manned by a pair of equally bored, equally drenched looking guards. The moment they saw Krum and I approaching, they sat up, looking very alert, but Krum by-passed them without comment, I gave them a look that I hope conveyed pity for their position, but perhaps it was lost on muggles, because they just glowered at me.

The rain let up slightly as we walked toward the entrance of the Monika and once we were inside, it appeared to stop altogether, though I was unsure if that was merely some enchantment on the building. Krum walked silently to a lift, I assumed it was still expected of me to follow, so I entered the lift after him. He hit a button for the top floor and signalled me to remain quiet as we rose through the building by placing a finger on his lips. We reached the top floor faster than I'd have imagined we could have, the lift was apparently magically enhanced. Krum left the lift and entered the stairwell; I followed him, becoming increasingly bewildered and frustrated. He took the stairs upward and pushed open the exit and stepped out onto the flat roof.

There were two people already up here; a Stabsfeldwebel and a dark haired girl I was pretty sure was a local. He had her pressed up against the wall, her short skirt pulled up to her waist and his trousers around his ankles. Krum and I froze for a moment, unsure how to react, then Krum slammed the door behind us and the pair leapt away from each other. She hastily pulled down her skirt and bolted past us, her ample breasts bouncing as she ran, the soldier tried to follow her, but ended up tripping himself up on his own trousers and collapsing at Krum's feet. Gently Krum placed a boot on the man's neck and applied the slightest amount of pressure.

"Pena, what the fuck are you doing?" asked Krum with a leer.

"What wasn't I doing, sir?" replied Pena, with smirk and Krum pushed down a little harder on his neck.

"No more girls, Pena. They shouldn't be here, because you shouldn't be here. Understand?"

"On the roof, sir?"

"In Riga, you idiot. The Soviets aren't to know you, or I, or leutnant Potter are here. Now get downstairs to your quarters before I have you strung up," snapped Krum testily.

"Yessir!" cried Pena, leapt to his feet, picked up his trousers with as much dignity as he could manage and strode through the door and down the stairs, Krum slammed it again and threw a stream of privacy charms at it, then turned to me.

"I don't think we'll be overheard up here," he said and looked around slightly, as though expecting Soviets to be hanging by string from the clouds. "I didn't want to say anything in Leipzig, how the fuck can you know who or what is listening in?" Krum seemed agitated and he began to pace the rooftop. "We've been at war for two and a half weeks," said Krum finally and gave a sigh of relief, as though he'd finally got something very heavy off his chest.

"Two and a half weeks?" I recollection I think I might have shrieked this at him because he cringed at looked away.

"Two and a half weeks ago, the Soviets spilled out of the USSR and straight into Estonia."

"How far did they get?"

"Pretty far-"

Suddenly Krum was interrupted by a loud whistling sound from above. I instinctively knew what the sound was and that the fact it was directly overhead was seriously bad, I threw myself to the ground, hoping for some cover as the whistling became louder and then there was a deafening bang. After a few moments, during which I wasn't blown into a thousand pieces, I looked up and saw Krum staring at me, a look of amusement on his face, he hadn't even moved.

I looked around to see where the shell had landed but couldn't see any obvious signs of devastation. There was another loud whistling and I looked up. A second shell descended upon us, but exploded about four feet over Krum's head, preceded slightly by a flash of

white light, I suddenly felt extremely stupid, anti-artillery protections, how could I have been so thick? I climbed to my feet again.

"Pena had his trousers around his ankles, what's your excuse?" asked Krum, his dark eyes gleaming.

"Fuck I'm glad nobody else saw that!" I exclaimed, dusting myself off. "What on earth was that?"

"A 2A65. They've been pounding us for almost a week now."

"A 2A65? Where the fuck is that?"

"There's twelve just the other side of Carnikava."

"Carnikava? That's less than twenty five kilometers from here! That's certainly some push through Estonia."

"They've control of Saaremaa as well."

"Holy shit," I said in soft dismay. Saaremaa was an island off the coast of Estonia of vital significance. If the USSR held Saaremaa, it blocked our Navy in the Rigan Gulf from reaching the North Sea. "They're moving south, aren't they? Cutting us off and laying siege to the city, right?"

"Exactly," said Krum, confirming my suspicions. "That's why you're here, why we're here, why the unit is here. We're to run interference, cut supply lines, knock out communications, distract them whilst our forces south of here move to cut up along the Russian border and encircle the attackers."

"This isn't a full Jagdgeschwader. There's no way we could operate like that with a full wing."

"On paper we are, but in reality; sixteen handpicked men and us two." Krum sighed and turned his back on me. "The Standartenführer in command of Riga has been ordered that no circumstances are we to lose Riga. We defend it, or die trying."

The orders made sense; there were three main roads through Latvia from Estonia and they all converged on Riga, if they didn't take one or all of these roads, they'd have to navigate their main invasion

force through the hills, woods and back roads of central Latvia. This, combined with the fact that the only other location they could cross the Daugava with any expedience was one hundred and fifty miles to the south east, made Riga the perfect place to hold back the Soviet invasion.

The artillery barrages began again, though this time we could see them falling across Kronvalda Parks. There was a sickening lurch in my stomach as I watched the spire of St. Peter's Church explode in a shower of dust and debris. Even the ever-stoic Krum gave a dismayed grunt as the tower fell. I felt like I could have been sick on the spot, had my stomach not been empty.

Krum finally located his staff car and we drove out to the airfield west of Riga, the rain had long stopped and the smells of damp grass and wet earth reminded me of my childhood. I took the time to read through the files of the men under our command, one through sixteen. Krum had elected to sit in the back seat with me, perhaps to make conversation, but if he resented my stoic silence, he certainly didn't show it. After some minutes, I spoke, trying to make some sense of the situation I found myself in.

"Why does nobody know we're at war?" I asked. Krum gave me a scornful look.

"Use your brain," he said in sharp reprimand and I scowled.

He was right though, it was obvious if I thought about it. Freedom of information was a laughable matter in this bleak world. Riddle and his SS censored anything in the press that was even vaguely the truth, to the point where the newspapers, tv-reports and radio was essentially no more than drivelling propaganda. I recall, as a young boy, asking my father why we in Britain were ruled by a man who lived in Germany.

Even then, at the tender age of six, I could see the inherent flaws in being ruled by a man so far detached from us, our culture and our way of life that it was madness. It was true even now; the armies of the third Reich had marched far afield and conquered everything in their path, so far indeed that they couldn't begin to comprehend the societies that they conquered, the cultures that they suppressed; big men with small minds. Worst of them all was the man sat atop the Emporer's throne.

Grindelwald had been a junior member of the Austrian ministry during Hitler's rise to power, he was steadily becoming an experienced and powerful wizard, a shrewd politician but that which procured his rise to greatness and that important than anything else about him was his silver tongue. He represented everything Hitler dreamed of and whispered promises of loyalty, power and immortality that ensnared the dictator's mind and that eventually lead to his death.

By 1943, there was only one man, who truly stood in the way of the advancing German horde, who realistically had a chance to end what Grindelwald called 'progression'. Albus Dumbledore was recognised as one of the most powerful wizards in the world and one of the greatest in Hogwart's long, celebrated list of teachers. He was an almost certainty for the British Minister for Magic and a firm believer in the freedoms and rights of all people. He alone stood before this tyrant and oppressor of men.

I was jerked from my musing as the staff car pulled up onto the tarmac and stopped before a small gathering of soldiers milling around. A few were smoking whilst playing cards on an upturned crate, whilst others stood and talked intently, a few sat or stood alone in silence. As we approached, they quickly closed ranks and stood to attention. Krum leapt from the car, his hat tucked under his arm, I followed at a slower speed, walking around the side of the car. Krum examined them for a moment.

"At ease gentlemen," he said curtly and the men shuffled slightly, no longer at attention. "I am Major Krum and this is Oberleutnant Potter." He pointed me out before continuing in a authoritative tone, "As you may have realised by now; you find yourselves part of an unusual unit, a type of unit that has never before been seen in the history of warfare." He began to pace up and down, looking very severe. "You have been selected from all types of units, all countries of the empire, all walks of life to form the most elite unit the world has ever seen." He looked around at them, glowering. "Welcome to the 26th."

Krum had apparently decided that this was enough of a formal introduction to the unit and without another word, swiftly walked away in the direction of one of the hangars that bordered the airstrip.

He made no motion for me, or any of the men to follow him so I stepped forward and made an attempt to take charge.

"At ease gentlemen, return to what you were doing" I said sharply and the sixteen men dissolved back into the loose groups that they'd formed before, which I noted now, appeared to be based around their respective mother tongues. I approached the group who were speaking English. The five of them were huddled together; each of them smoking tightly rolled cigarettes. I picked out the only one of them I even vaguely recognised and gave him a terse nod. "Alright Diggory?"

Cedric looked up at me and I almost recoiled in horror, the Cedric Diggory I remembered from Hogwarts was handsome and always had an easy smile to hand. The man that looked back at me looked rugged, scarred and there was no trace of smile on his face, just a long drawn expression that made him appear to be in a great deal of pain.

"Sir," he replied, his mouth barely moving as he spoke. I shuddered at the formal tone of his voice.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, in what I hoped was an endearing tone, "I'm Harry, or Potter at the very least."

I noticed suddenly that this conversation had caught the attention of every person on the airstrip. There was a palpable air of tension amongst the men, as if Diggory's response would make or break my leadership. In fact, it probably would. To my great relief, Diggory gave me the most painful smile I've ever seen and put his hand on my shoulder, forcing me into the huddle of men.

"Glad to have you with us Potter," he said in a raspy voice. The tension dispersed as soon as it came and someone handed me a cigarette, I put it between my lips and lit it with a click of my fingers. I usually wouldn't have smoked, but it probably would have caused a little strife between me and the men and with my position apparently so fragile, I didn't think it would be a good idea. Thankfully, I'd smoked on and off and as such didn't cough up my lungs on the first drag, saving myself some embarrassment.

Slowly, between snippets of conversation, I associated the files I'd read with those around me. Other than I and another fresh recruit

called Anthony Davies, everyone in the huddle had seen action at least once before and John-Patrick Bracken, or "Paddy" as he appeared to be known to everyone and Diggory had served in the same unit in Iceland.

If I'd felt a little out of my depth around Krum's fearsome reputation and well publicized heroics, I felt completely submerged now around these men's cool disregard for their own valour. The worst of Diggory's scars, a wound that ran from the base of his neck to the bottom of his ear was apparently sustained whilst leading a charge into a trench outside Akureyri.

"Silly yank cook came at me with a meat cleaver, completely took me by surprise," he said grimly, then flashed a pained grimace around. "Funny thing was though, the Americans sent me a bronze star for killing him, apparently the battalion mess benefited greatly without him."

Everyone laughed heartily, leaving Anthony and I to chime in weakly. Apparently he wasn't cavalier about the loss of life either.

We stood around for a while talking, the groups divided by language slowly merging together until all sixteen of us were perched on ammo crates and helmets, chatting easily. Despite some good natured ribbing of the greener recruits, including myself, there was a distinct level of camaraderie amongst us already. I found that Paddy especially was pretty easy to talk to.

"Do you drink?" he asked, in his incomprehensible manner, an odd cross between English pronounced too quickly in an Irish accent and someone attempting to gargle petrol whilst speaking. I stared at him blankly for a long moment before he chuckled and punched me on the shoulder. "Do you drink?" he repeated, slower this time and I shook my head slowly.

"Not so much," I answered, but apparently he caught something in the tone of my voice and grimaced.

"How long you been sober?" he asked, a wry smile evident in the tone of his voice that didn't appear on his face. I understood him immediately this time, a marked improvement I thought.

"Six months," I said resignedly, something about this Irishman made me feel comfortable talking about myself. I don't usually open up like this. He nodded and produced a hipflask from his tuchrock and I reflexively shook my head. Paddy gave me a look of solidarity and patted me reassuringly on the shoulder.

"Look, you're going to start drinking again sooner or later, out in the field. You might as well start now," he said sympathetically, "besides, I want to know you can handle it before you get us all killed."

"Charming," I responded half-heartedly and took the flask from him, I examined it disparagingly for a moment then looked back at Paddy, "What is it?"

"Old Bushmills, it's a twenty-one year old single malt. So don't be treating her bad."

I whistled appreciatively and took a small sip, testing the waters, so to speak. It wasn't bad, a little dry perhaps and metallic from the flask, but it warmed me through immediately. I handed back the flask and noted, with no little disgust the huge swig he threw back. What a waste. My attention was then drawn to the conversation that the rest of the group were involved in.

It seemed to centre around the slight young man sat chewing gum, an aloof expression on his face. He was the only one of the seventeen of us to be carrying a firearm; a bolt action rifle was haphazardly slung over his shoulder and the rest of the group seemed to be mocking him for it. I studied his face a moment, he appeared to be of Scandinavian descent and I knew immediately who he was.

"Rasmus Ledorf?" I asked him, he gave me a discerning stare and nodded slowly. A few of the men bristled in indignation, others raised their eyebrows in interest but the majority, those who'd never heard the name before, just looked curious. I dropped the subject, there was no point hashing up the past. However, some of the others clearly didn't share my view on the subject.

One in particular, a stocky man of Latin descent stood, sending cards, drinks and his own helmet flying. Some others followed his example and rose, some in order to calm the situation; other's possibly just looking for a fight. I rose myself and prepared to calm

the man now held back by two of his comrades and spewing insults in accented Italian at the Danish sharpshooter. In response, Rasmus shrugged, stood and began to walk toward the same hangar Krum had disappeared into.

"My name is Aldo Fabrizi, you murdering Danish scum!"

This stopped Rasmus in his tracks but he didn't turn toward Aldo but this momentary acknowledgement seemed to make the Italian even more irate and he let loose with another diatribe of curses. I stepped forward to handle matters.

"Stand down Schutze or I'll make you," I said in a level voice. His head whipped around to face me, his face a mask of fury.

"Shut your face, Englishman. You might be my superior in rank but you're nothing but a boy."

I regretted the words even as they left his lips. He'd just challenged my leadership and to step away now, to lose face in front of the men I was supposed to be leading would be disastrous and certainly a premature end to my career in this unit. I sighed and tapped Paddy's shoulder in indication that he should move.

"Let him go," I ordered the two men holding the Italian back. They did as I said and everyone backed away slightly, they knew that it was going to get messy quickly. "Wands or fists?" I ask Aldo and he scoffed, he'd clearly not expected me to actually call him out.

"Fists," he snarled and internally I sighed in relief, magic would have caused much more collateral damage. I raised my right hand toward him and made a beckoning motion. I knew it would be best to end this as quickly as possible and luckily for me, blinded by rage as he was, he came swinging at me almost immediately. His first blow sailed harmlessly over my head as I ducked under his swing, planting my own punch into his right kidney.

He dropped to one knee, gasping for breath and I immediately rose before swinging my torso down and right, levelling him with an elbow to the back of the head. I fell with him and pinned him to the ground with my forearm against the back of his neck, straddling him on my knees.

The entire encounter lasted perhaps five seconds and I pinned Aldo to the tarmac just long enough to make my point. When I rose again, I looked around at the men, my men and glowered at them, challenging them to repeat Aldo's mistake. When nobody seemed particularly eager to, I addressed them in a harsh voice. I'd tried to integrate myself and failed, so now I had to establish my dominance.

"Fabrizi made the same mistake most of you made on meeting me; he wrote me off as an inexperienced child. Whilst I might be both, I was made your executive officer for a reason; I am a soldier and I am exceedingly good at what I do. I demand both your respect and loyalty, if you are unable to give me either of these, then leave now, I won't make a move to stop you. But I promise you all this; I'll kill the next person who challenges me."

Nobody moved a muscle or said a word so I walked away in the direction of the hangar, neither rushing nor dawdling. I drew Rasmus away with me as I did so, there was no point in letting Aldo curse him the moment I was gone. Now things were less intense, I allowed myself to examine the soldier walking beside me.

Rasmus Ledorf was another man of legend among some soldiers of the Third Reich and a horror story told amongst others. Around fifteen years ago Grindlewald, or perhaps Riddle had decided that the lords governing Italy in their stead weren't quite up to the task, or more likely, all but openly defying the Third Reich. The official response from Leipzig was to assassinate everyone involved.

In perhaps seven days, five assassins killed more than twenty two members of the Italian aristocracy and government and one bystander, an eleven year old girl; Gina Fabrizi, Aldo Fabrizi's little sister. Rasmus Ledorf was the only one of the assassins captured and thus publicly identified, he was later given the Iron Cross for 'loyalty to the Third Reich'. If I remembered correctly, Ledorf's 'loyalty' involved shooting four men and a little girl in front of an audience of children at the opening of a new magical school.

Despite my defence of him, I couldn't help but find the man walking so calmly beside me extremely distasteful; it takes a certain type of man to willingly put innocent children in the crossfire. Although I had a healthy respect for his skill as a soldier, after all one doesn't fire five incredibly accurate shots in the space of half a minute without incredible skill, I already saw him as a liability to the unit, partly

because of the controversy he would stir up amongst the men and partly, if his file was to be believed, because Rasmus Ledorf was a psychopath.

He was captured a day after the shootings by Italian Polizia and soldiers of the Third Reich and interrogated for another eight before he was finally released. He was checked over by the finest doctors in the Empire and they determined that although physically he was a wreck, mentally he was lucid, strong and intelligent. The man killed four men and a child, was tortured for over a week and returned to service three weeks later with a spring in his step. The stoic, unreadable man beside me certainly met my expectations of the 'Salerno Shooter'.

As we entered the hangar together, I had to wonder what criminally negligent person decided to put this man and Aldo Fabrizi in the same unit. It was insane; anyone with any degree of sanity would have had to realize that it would eventually lead to bloodshed. Unless, I thought whilst looking for Krum amongst the hundred or so gibbering intelligence officers working at the hundred or so ramshackle tables in the hangar, that was exactly the intention, use Aldo Fabrizi to murder Rasmus Ledorf and be done with, in one fell swoop, what were shaping up to be two serious liabilities. I was already beginning to hate my billing. Hopefully I was reading too much into a clerical error and this would all blow over.

It didn't take long to find Krum's brooding shape at one of the farthest desks and at this point Rasmus caught my eye, nodded his thanks and left my company in favour of a cute witch pouring over a map and jotting something on a sheet of paper. They appeared to be old friends or more and so I left him to it. I joined Krum as he was being briefed by an extremely harassed looking balding man tracing a route along a second map, Krum acknowledged my presence with his usual glower and I tried to pick up the conversation the best I could.

"-And so your best bet would be fly north as far as Gulbene, praying that your enchanted tin cans get you that far and then proceed by foot toward Aluksne, following the tracks as closely as you possibly can-" he broke off from his briefing to stare at me, clearly hesitant to continue in front of me but Krum waved him on impatiently, so he continued at once "Once you're there, the four targets are located in these spots," he drew four circles on the map in red pen "and don't

ask me how you'd approach them, because I'm an ordinator, not a soldier."

Krum nodded, snatched the pen off the man, jotted some incoherent notes in the top corner of the map in what I assumed was Bulgarian, threw the pen aside, seized the map and stalked off. With what I hoped was an apologetic smile tempered with amusement I followed him out of the hangar. A quick look at the men informed me that they were more settled than they'd been when I left and before we were too close I decided it was something I had to bring up with Krum.

"Major," I hissed urgently, he stopped immediately and turned to face me. I caught up a little and thought about how best to phrase what I was about to say. Krum interpreted my expression and body language correctly and almost barked a question at me.

"You fought Aldo Fabrizi?"

I tried my hardest not to look surprised.

"You saw?"

"No but I assumed you would, there was no other way to get the men to accept you than to show you off in your element."

"That's why you put Fabrizi and Ledorf in the same unit?" I asked bewildered.

"I wish," replied Krum darkly and took a glance over his shoulder toward the men. "Riddle wants Ledorf dead, Fabrizi too if at all possible. They're both a black stain on his otherwise spotless career that he's been waiting far too long for an opportunity to clean up."

"So why doesn't Riddle just have him interned and quietly murdered by his SS?"

"Because Ledorf is a favourite of the Emperor," spat Krum in disgust, it appeared he had no fondness for the Dane either. "Murders a child and the Emperor treats him like a hero, gives him the highest award of bravery he can."

I resist the urge to make mention of the Major's own speckled past and nod in agreement. Krum takes another glance in the direction of the men and lowers his voice to a half whisper.

"I plan on giving Fabrizi his chance to avenge his sister. You'd be well advised to stay out of it," he obviously sees my reservations and glowers even more intensely at me. "Listen Potter, I know your father and if you're anything like him you've never been more outraged by the idea of a soldier's superiors planning his death, but if you can keep your mouth shut, your wits about you and just do your damn job for three or four months you'll very quickly see yourself promoted out of this mess and more importantly I'll be promoted out of this mess, because to be fucking honest, I'm sick of killing people for some sexual deviant's fantasy of ruling the world."

At this point of my life, I'd never heard anyone speak so plainly and openly in defiance of the Emperor and I quickly found myself in awe of Krum. I nodded my assent and we walked together to the men, who erupted into protests at the sight of us, the general consensus amongst them appeared to be a complete unwillingness to work with 'that psychotic bastard'. It appeared as though Fabrizi might not be the only one Ledorf would have to watch out for. One way or another, Riddle was going to get what he wanted.

I stood for a moment, watching Krum take charge of those with the most passionate protests and Paddy sidled up to stand next to me, he offered me his flask again and I took a long gulp gratefully.

"You shook the proverbial hornet's nest with that little stunt," he said after a moment. "I think we were all impressed at how quickly you dropped Fabrizi, some more than others but you've earned yourself a little respect. But you know you're going to have to prove yourself a confident leader in the field before you convince some of us older soldiers, right?"

I gave him a sly smile and laughed slightly.

"Well I'd fucking hope so, being such an inexperienced child, eh?"

I'm assuming that if you've bothered to read ten thousand words of this, you're pretty keen on the idea, if I'm wrong, don't hesitate to let me know. The important thing to remember when reading this is that this is a world very different to the Harry Potter universe you know

and love. It's different in a huge variety of ways and as a result, has shaped the people in it very differently. I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I hated writing it.

Chapter II

Although my relatively short story begins that cold winter in Leipzig, the story I am attempting to impart to you began a century before. Though I suppose if you traced it far enough back, as with all things that happen, it would have its roots in the very first moments of creation, but I digress. The year is eighteen ninety nine and a hitherto very much unnoticed and unassuming wizard has just moved to Sarajevo. His name is Andro Milisovic and he's about fifteen years away from starting the First World War

Now, Andro certainly didn't intend to cause the First World War and he certainly didn't begin with dark intentions, but then people seldom do. He didn't even consider himself, upon his arrival in Sarajevo anything other than a mediocre, Muggle-born warlock. What he did consider though, long and hard in fact, was the oppression of his people by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and as is such in these cases, finding himself with abnormal ability and a problem to solve, set about solving it with very little consideration to the consequences.

It was not very long after that he fell in with a group that would later be known as the Black Hand. These likeminded individuals were everything Andro Milisovic could have hoped for, his way to a united and free Slavic empire. Fortunately for Andro the Black Hand were connected, powerful and muggles and I doubt Andro had much difficulty in controlling them. Of course, he still acted with good intention and I'm sure he consoled himself with the idea that he was truly helping them to reach their goal.

By nineteen fourteen Andro had everything exactly to plan, working through the Black Hand, who in turn were working through a smaller organisation he'd set up a number of assassins and Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand was scheduled to appear in Sarajevo. The assassination was seen by Andro as the beginning of a number stepping stones to a liberated Slavic nation, however, what he didn't foresee were the radical steps that the Austro-Hungarian Empire took and likewise, the counter steps that the government of Serbian government.

By this time, for obvious reasons Andro Milisovic had caught the attention of several international wizarding governing bodies and upon discovering hitwizards from the International Confederation of Wizards on his front stoop, decided he'd rather go out in a blaze of

spellfire than be taken alive. By this point however, the damage that Andro had done to international relationships between muggle governments was critical. It was a startling message to the wizarding world; one mediocre warlock's meddling in the affairs of muggles lead to the single bloodiest war that the world had ever seen.

Unfortunately, it wasn't only amongst those who were appalled by Milisovic's actions that eyebrows were raised, all over Europe, those who sought power, mayhem and destruction saw the effects that one weak wizard could have. This great upheaval, the introduction of wizards into muggle culture and vice versa is what ultimately lead to my involvement in some of the most decisive events of the twentieth century.

Four days after Krum and I arrived in Riga I found myself sat in the co-pilot's seat of a Gotha, listening to the stretched fabric creak around us and the wind whistle past the tiny craft. Staring out into the darkness, I thought over the events that had lead me to this; cruising over enemy lines in an enchanted construction of wood, canvas and steel tubing. It was pure madness, I was convinced of it and I'd said so to Krum several times before we'd left. The Bulgarian had merely shrugged off my worries however and now all eighteen of us were inside this death trap.

Trying very hard to ignore the obvious flaws in this plan, I tried to look down out of the glass in front of me. Below us somewhere was Malpils and a train track that we were supposed to be following, but Krum was jealously guarding the map and navigational instruments and so I had no idea where we really were. Every now and again small pockets of light would come into view somewhere far below, which Krum studiously avoided. Something for which I was thankful, each one of those pockets of light was either a town, a village or particularly large gathering of soviet troops.

I rose from my seat gingerly and placed my water canteen near Krum with the lid unscrewed, he flashed me a smile of thanks without once taking his eyes from the window before him. Clambering through the tiny door behind us, carefully ducking my head as I emerged, I sat abruptly on the end of one of the two benches that lined the long chassis of the glider. I gave a half smile to Paddy, who was sat next to me. He turned to better face me and caught me a glancing blow to the jaw with the butt of his rifle.

"For fuck's sake!" I exclaimed, rubbing my aching jaw. Paddy gave me a contrite look.

"Sorry sir," he said, clearly trying to keep himself from laughing. "Not used to this bloody thing yet."

It was a fair point I supposed, although firearms were a mandatory experience in our training, it was generally accepted that it was a pointless endeavour as no wizard in his right mind would choose a firearm over a wand after all. I spared a glance toward Ledorf. None of us were used to our firearms yet and were all decidedly clumsy with them. We'd all trained with the old MAS-49, a bulky weapon made primarily of heavy wood and as a result we'd all picked up some pretty bad habits that came to light now we'd been upgraded.

I looked at my own rifle, resting benignly against the wall of the aircraft. It looked impressive, I wasn't a fan of firearms or anything muggle for that matter, but even I had to admit that it was an attractive piece of equipment. As opposed to the MAS-49, the PARA FAL was made predominantly of metal and felt about half as heavy as the MAS-49. The things I admired most about it however, was that it was a fully automatic weapon and that it had a folding stock, essentially allowing it to be handled like a submachine gun in close quarters. We found, however, that none of us had any semblance of control over the weapon at distance, but thankfully the weapon had the ability to be toggled to semi-automatic, something we were all far more comfortable with.

It was grudgingly then, that the majority of the unit picked up the muggle firearms and Ledorf stuck doggedly to his bolt action rifle. I nudged Paddy and pointed out Jose Pena who was sleeping at the far end of the glider. Jose Pena was already something of a legend amongst the men of the unit; after he revealed that he'd once taken a bazooka round to the chest everyone seemed slightly in awe. He was the single most experienced soldier of anyone in the glider and had he been anyone other than Jose Pena, he'd be the most decorated General in the Reich.

However, between his amazing ability to take everything in his stride and constant infractions meant that he was a Stabsfeldwebel, nothing like his twenty two years in service warranted, and not a single medal to his name. Even I, knowing the truth behind the

alleged bazooka round, was slightly in awe of him. The ability to sleep going into battle is something to be honoured by its own right.

Closer to us, Timothy Blenkinsopp, who seemed to have found something of a protégée in Antony Davies, was taunting Franco Ritter, a German, sitting opposite. The pair were reciting Rudyard Kipling in a hushed tone, Davies joining in where he knew the words.

"For all we have and are,

For all our children's fate,

Stand up and meet the war.

The Hun is at the gate!"

I couldn't help but snigger at the expression on Franco's face, a mixture of fury, confusion and amusement. Paddy elbowed me.

"Should an officer really find that amusing sir?" he asked, laughing.

"Probably not," I said, trying hard not to laugh myself and together we joined in for the next four lines.

"Our world has passed away,

In wantonness o'erthrown.

There is nothing left to-day,

But steel and fire and stone."

We both chuckled again, but our hearts weren't really in it any more, we'd both come to sudden awful realisation that it was us now that he spoke of, not the English soldiers going to fight and die in the fields of France. I stood and gave Paddy an affectionate jab on the shoulder.

"Not long now," I said and pulled myself back into the cockpit, my head swimming with thoughts of soldiers dying in foreign fields. I wonder if any of my ancestors had fought in France and how many were still there, lying amongst the thousands of rows of white

crosses. I suddenly had the desire to visit France, or anywhere that wasn't here, to be perfectly honest.

I took my seat beside Krum and took a swig from my canteen. He barely looked up from what he was doing to acknowledge me.

"How much farther?" I asked, staring out at the darkness. Rather than answer, he pointed out a small pool of light a little way ahead, I assumed that this was Gulbene. The plan was to land the glider some way outside the town and progress northward, following the tracks. As we grew closer to the town, the glider began to shake uncontrollably; Krum and I looked at each other for a moment and came to the same conclusion. I jumped from my seat and threw myself toward the doorway.

"Magical suspension around Gulbene! Brace for impact!" I roared. The men moved to their crash landing positions, packing rifles between each other and linking arms. A particularly nasty lurch of the aircraft flung me from the door like a ragdoll, bouncing off the canvas wall and clattering to the floor. Paddy seized me as another violent shake threatened to throw me down the gangway. I wrenched myself to my feet, Paddy shouting something incoherent in my ear as I did, and headed back to the cockpit, levering myself inside, I hit Krum hard in the shoulder and leaned close in to yell in his ear.

"AIM FURTHER FROM THE TOWN!"

"WHAT?"

"THE INVISIBILITY IS GONE, WE'LL BE SEEN!"

I assumed Krum had understood me, because he tilted the glider into a horrific angle and for the first time I saw why my commanding officer was considered such a prodigy. His face was twisted into an incredible frown of concentration, his arms literally bulging as he fought the aircraft against the winds buffeting the canvas construct. I looked to my canteen which lay dry on the floor, the replenishing charm had clearly worn off, meaning that Krum was now steering the glider with no magical influence.

But as hard as Krum worked and as powerfully as he pulled the controls, the ground was looming ever closer at a speed that was

nowhere close to approach speed. In a split second judgement, I flung myself from the cockpit and seized one of the metal pipes that stretched the canvas taught. A split second later the entire craft lurched one final time and then with an awful sound of breaking metal and tearing fabric, the entire glider disintegrated from under my feet and I was flung twenty or thirty feet through the air.

I've no idea how long it took them to find me, all I remember is being shook awake by Blenkinsopp, my head ringing with pain and my face strangely wet. I sat up and wiped blood from my face and stubble, there was a wound on my forehead that my fingers explored gingerly, it wasn't too deep. I looked around and saw debris from the glider strewn across the field, like a newspaper caught by the wind. I looked back at Blenkinsopp.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked, surprised at how groggy my voice sounded.

"Ritter bought it," he said with an anguished tone. I shared his pain; twenty minutes ago we were mocking the German, now he'd be abandoned with the wreckage of the glider.

"Where's Krum?"

"Trying to salvage from the cockpit of the glider."

I got to my feet slightly unsteadily and made my way over to the cockpit. I caught sight of the broken body of Franco amongst the rubble and tried very hard not to stare. Krum looked up at me as I approached and gave me a relieved smile.

"Nice of you to finally join us Potter," he remarked slyly and then examined the wound on my head. "Go get that checked out by Pena, get him to bandage it or the blood will just keep running into your eyes. They're just down that bank there, in the ditch."

I nodded and examined the wreckage one more time, the entire left side of the cockpit was caved in and I thanked my stars silently that I'd not been sitting in my seat. I slid down the embankment and came face to face with the other fourteen soldiers. Cedric immediately stepped forward and assisted me to Pena, who I collapsed in front of. The Spaniard looked me in the eyes and laughed heartily.

"It'll take more than that to do you in, sir!" he exclaimed, whilst lathering my forehead with bandages.

"Well, if you keep that ruckus up you'll bring the soviets and they'll bring bullets and they will do me in Pena."

"Yessir!" he said, not dropping his voice a decibel. I sighed and allowed him to give me a turban of bandages before I arose unsteadily. My head felt slightly restricted and the blood on the side of my face was beginning to dry uncomfortably. Not that I could really complain, not after what happened to Franco. I looked around at the men.

"Did anyone manage to find my rifle?" I asked without much hope. Paddy stepped forward and held out a rifle.

"Here's Franco's," he said simply and passed it to me. I gave the weapon a once over, checking the magazine, the rear aperture and the barrel briefly, pausing only to wipe blood from the front sight. The gun suddenly weighed on my arm like an anchor, so I put it down and to hide my grief, looked around.

"Everyone equipped and ready?"

Several "Yessirs!" were barked back at me but most of the men just nodded stoically.

"I'm going to go get the Major and we'll be off. Pena, Diggory-" I addressed the two highest ranked soldiers "-Organise the men into two squads, ensure everyone's supplied and ready in five." The two non-coms nodded and quickly began dividing up the men between them, doing their jobs with a practiced ease, I realised now why Krum had chosen them.

As I climbed back up the embankment, I decided that I was glad I was seeing action with Krum as my officer. Pucey and Krum were two completely different types of people, Pucey efficient and vivacious but far too obsessed with ceremony and climbing the political ladder, he saw his military career as a way to climb the social hierarchy. Krum on the other hand was a true combat leader, he ignored paperwork and doctrine and chose NCO's who did the same, he picked soldiers who were soldiers and fought not for a love

of fighting, or to advance his career, but because there was fighting to be done and someone had to.

It was something that we both shared, both of us were from wealthy, powerful families, neither of us had to be here. I found him crouched over Franco's corpse and I forced myself to look into the dead German's eyes. After about a minute, when I could bear it no more, I crouched down over him and gently closed his eyelids with my fingers. Hating myself more and more, I patted down his uniform for spare equipment and found nothing but a letter. I pushed it into my back pocket and seized Krum, hoisting him to his feet. He looked mournfully at me.

"I've never lost one before we've even seen the enemy," he said and I shook him slightly.

"Well we're going to lose a whole lot more if you don't get a move on."

I could hear raised voices from the direction of the bank, so I hurried over, not knowing if Krum was even following. As I approached the top of the bank I could see the soldiers below with their weapons trained on an old man, carrying a shotgun. The men were all shouting in their respective languages and I was pretty certain the old man was shouting in native Latvian, but before I could really get a grasp on the situation a soldier stepped forward from the crowd. I recognised him immediately as Rasmus Ledorf and with a sinking feeling in my stomach, I could predict something awful happening. Just as I began to slide down the bank to break up the situation, I saw Rasmus reach for his sidearm.

Someone else darted forward to stop him, but I could already see that they weren't going to be quick enough. Ledorf produced a silenced .45 and with two whispered gunshots, dropped the old man where he stood. Paddy picked up Ledorf by the knees and dumped him heavily on the ground and I hit the ground running. Pushing my way through the stunned soldiers I fell to my knees at the side of the Latvian. One glance at him told me that he was probably stone dead before he'd even touched the ground, Rasmus had hit him once in the heart and once in the forehead with two phenomenally quick shots.

When I got up and turned around, Paddy was still kneeling on the pinned Ledorf and Krum was standing between Ledorf and the rest of the men. I picked up my rifle and nudged Paddy with my foot.

"Up!" I ordered and Paddy rose reluctantly. I offered Ledorf my hand and heaved him to his feet. I quickly relieved him of his silenced weapon and after putting the safety on, pushed it into my waistband. I grabbed the Dane by the collar and shook him slightly. "Next time you fucking wait for an order. Is that understood you little shit?"

He nodded uncomfortably and I pushed him backward to the ground again. I picked up the dead Latvian's shotgun and examined it; it was a simple, short, two barrelled affair, with a shell in each chamber and no spares. I strapped it to my leg anyway and addressed the men a second time.

"Next time, shoot and ask questions later. There's a difference between engaging a potential enemy and murder. Last thing we want is that to be one of you lying there in a pool of your own blood. Now, we precede north, take a staggered formation, Diggory's squad on the left side and Pena's on the right. Move out."

We trudged across fields for hours, keeping the light of Gulbene firmly to our west. The grass was frosted through and crunched satisfyingly underfoot. A light breeze clutched at our uniforms and we were quickly frozen through. A sombre mood had gripped the unit and the sporadic attempts at a whispered conversation fell through with a depressing regularity. Eventually we reached the road designated as LP35 on our sand tables and we paused to take stock of our situation.

Krum and I poured over the map for a few moments and then, deciding on an approximate location decided to cross the road and continue heading northwest, until we found the railway we were supposed to be following to Aluksne. It was a fifteen mile hike and we probably wouldn't reach the town until day break.

The unit crossed the road with a practiced stealth; moving two scouts up and down the road slightly to spot movement and when concluding that there was none, as one unit we crossed, ensuring minimal time in the open. We continued our path northward; the most eventful moment was meeting a herd of cows head on in the dark. As we walked, I could feel the weight of Franco's letter in my

back pocket; I vowed to send the letter at the next possible opportunity.

I positioned myself at the centre of the two squads, with Krum behind me, my rifle loose in my hands, but my entire body geared for a fight, fresh adrenaline coursing through my veins with each step. We reached the railroad faster than I'd expected, and we collapsed against the gravel bank for a moment, allowing us to take stock of our bearings once more and more importantly allowing the unit to catch their breaths.

Paddy had just begun to pass out smokes when footsteps reached our ears from the north; footsteps on the gravel, progressing southward down the lines. In an instant, rifles were seized up, cigarettes tossed to the floor and curses muttered under held breaths. Alexander Thalburg, who'd positioned himself a little up the line as lead scout, came crashing down onto the gravel beside Krum and whispered in his ear.

Krum reacted immediately, signalling second squad to move to the other side of the railway. Cedric at once marshalled his squad over the tracks, slipping and sliding on the gravel and took up textbook ambush positions. I followed at a slightly slower pace, trying to spot the formation of the soldiers approaching, but couldn't make out a thing in the dark. Lying on the other side of the tracks, I felt cold gravel press tightly into my chest through my uniform. I spent a moment adjusting the rear sight on my rifle in preparation.

Seconds ticked past, each elongated into hours as we waited with baited breath. Slowly, voices faded into earshot, they were definitely speaking Russian, loudly and with a great deal of laughter. They clearly had no expectation of being ambushed this far behind enemy lines. As they drew closer across the tracks, I began to distinguish their silhouettes from the darkness. I drew a sight on the soldier in my killing field and waited for that first shot to ring out. The soldier I had targeted turned to pass a cigarette to the man next to him.

When the first shot rang out, I fired off three shots in quick succession and the entire night blazed with gunfire for a few seconds. The entire experience was dazing, from almost no sound at all, seventeen guns rang out. The infantry we ambushed didn't even get the chance to fire a single shot back. After a few seconds, once the ringing had subsided from my ears and it was evident that

there was no return fire, I rose hesitantly; rifle still shouldered and approached the corpses.

The rest of the unit soon followed my example. The twelve men we'd killed appeared to be Russian conscripts. I crossed the tracks to find the man I'd aimed at still holding his packet of cigarettes. A shot rang out in the night behind me and I spun and dropped, my rifle at the ready, to see Ledorf re-cocking his bolt action, apparently having shot a Russian who was only wounded.

I didn't even bother attempting to reprimand the Dane this time, he was clearly unhinged and instead tried to calm my racing heart. Whilst some of the more experienced soldiers looted the corpses of the men they'd just killed, claiming packets of smokes, side arms, watches as their own, Krum and I stood slightly to the side with the greener recruits. I could tell Krum wanted to move on and I did too, who knew who the gunfire would bring running. Besides, I found the whole thing very distasteful.

Eventually we moved on, Diggory's squad moving on the left side of the embankment and Pena's along the left. Krum and I moved slightly ahead along with Thalburg, who seemed to have been appointed, or appointed himself, lead scout. Unlike the other Dane in the unit, I found myself taking a great liking to Thalburg and his sense of humour. There was something very calming about his ability to tell jokes, however poor they were, in the situation we were in. We walked for almost three quarters of an hour before he looked at me, a strange light gleaming mischievously in his eyes.

"What would you call a Russian tank on a hill, Leutnant?"

I laughed and shook my head "I don't know, Schutze, what would I call a Russian tank on a hill?"

"A fucking miracle, Leutnant."

We reached the town shortly before daybreak and infiltrated from the south, taking shelter in an abandoned barn at the edge of town. Thoroughly exhausted we set about to consume the paltry supplies we'd been able to carry on the glider without weighing it down too much. We set up the small stove that Diggory had been carrying and made hot cups of coffee.

Unfortunately, with neither milk nor sugar the instant blend was revolting, but it was hot and most importantly had huge quantities of caffeine in it. It was a testament to our misaligned priorities that there was a heated argument over whether we should conjure sugar and milk. Using magic too soon was eventually discouraged though, it wasn't certain that the Russian's would notice it, but it was a distinct possibility.

So, armed with my disgusting drink and equally disgusting lone sausage, I sat and chatted to Thalburg and Boone Halverson, our lone Norwegian, about women. It appeared Boone Halverson was something of a self proclaimed expert on women and discussed in length several sexual techniques that I felt I'd probably be slapped for suggesting to any woman I knew.

The more I listened and the more I watched Thalburg's expression change as Halverson explained his wiles with women kind, the more I garnered the suspicion that his exploits would become fresh fodder for Thalburg's repertoire of outstandingly awful jokes. Indeed, as Boone rose and left, Alexander moved slightly closer to me and in a dire Norwegian accent proclaimed, "You see, sir, when I stick the barbeque sauce and wet celery in the woman's-"

Krum drew me away later in the day, with a serious expression, I knew he was about to tell me something I should have heard before we'd left, he'd been cagey with the mission parameters and I'd been sure he wasn't telling me everything at the time. He sat me down with Ledorf, of all people and contemplated us for a moment.

"I hate to spring this on you two at the last minute," he began in a low voice, "but there's a reason we're here and it's nothing to do with blowing up artillery. I couldn't tell you earlier, if either of you had been captured we'd have had to abort and we're only going to get one real shot at this," he glanced over his shoulder to check on the men, but they were engrossed in another game of cards. "Fadei Chernenko is here in Aluksne. At approximately seven this evening, he is going to leave and you're going to assassinate him."

Both Ledorf and I stared at Krum unbelieving; it was Ledorf who found his voice first. "Major, they say this man, Chernenko, he is immortal. That magic and bullet alike are reflected away."

I could only nod, flabbergasted. I'd heard tales of Chernenko told in the same awe inspired tone of voice that people used when talking of Riddle. If they were anything to go by, Ledorf was correct, people had emptied entire drums of ammunition at him for nothing, it was said he had even duelled Grindlewald to a standstill in the past, with neither able to land a blow on him. Attempting to assassinate the man, it was verging on the point of suicide. Krum however, shook his head.

"The centre of the town is currently under all of the suspension wards the Russians can throw at it. The man is, at this moment, as vulnerable as a muggle, his magic brought to nothing by his own protections. They are too arrogant to believe we are able to get in striking distance."

I continued to stare at Krum, my brain working at light speed. "So, I see why he's here," I said, jerking my thumb at the Dane. "But what do you need me to do?"

There was a flare of a message in Krum's eyes that was gone almost as soon as I saw it. "Even in Italy Ledorf had a spotter and an aide infiltrating. What's more, he's already proved once he can't exfiltrate on his own."

Ledorf flashed Krum a dirty look but I nodded, my mind was still racing. Krum had certainly been trying to convey a message to me, but I had no idea what.

"How soon do you want us to move out?" I asked. "Have you already chosen a vantage point?"

"Immediately," said Krum, "and yes, the church tower. The target will be located in the square to the west. We'll make our dual assaults on the train station and artillery guns at ten past seven, giving you a distraction to use to escape. Head for the tree line behind this barn, we'll meet you here."

"How do we identify him?" asked Ledorf, looking like he was still processing the information he'd been given. Krum handed him a photograph and I craned over his shoulder to look at it. It was taken at a horrible angle, which made it very hard to take in anything particularly distinguishing other than the long blonde hair, but it seemed acceptable to Ledorf. Then after a moment, the Dane rose

and moved to the edge of the barn, his rifle held loosely at waist height, I followed in his wake, shrugging my own rifle onto my shoulder.

We hurried out into the twilight, I'd forgotten how early it gets dark in winter and it was slightly disorientating for a moment. We moved slowly into the town, once or twice narrowly avoiding patrols of Russian soldiers, the streets seemed to be literally swarming with them. We reached the church however, completely unopposed and drawing the silenced .45 I'd confiscated from Ledorf earlier, I lead the way, gun held between both hands at arm's length.

But the church appeared deserted and as we climbed the tower, we didn't see any signs of enemy activity at all. The bell tower itself was cold, draughty and severely inhospitable. So leaving Ledorf at the top of the tower to keep watch, I descended to the ground floor. Spending any more time than strictly necessary with the psychotic sniper was something I had no desire to do at all. Leaving my rifle propped against the altar, I stumbled into a confessional booth and sat for a long time, staring at the ceiling. My mind filled with thoughts of assassination, soldiers and France.

I'd just started to wonder if this was going to be my last night on earth when I heard the church doors open and footsteps enter. I caught a whisper of some half sung Russian song that died on the singer's lips. My mind jumped to the rifle leant casually against the altar and once again I drew the silenced weapon from the waistband of my trousers. As silently as possible I cocked the weapon, blood pounding in my ears, stomach curdling and my mouth dry. I heard footsteps approach the weapon and a puzzled voice calling out, sounding almost as hesitant as I felt. I tried to relax my breathing into a more regular pattern to the short shallow breaths I was taking. Very slowly indeed I began to creep around the corner toward the altar, almost shaking from the nerve wracking situation.

Suddenly, a low whistle sounded from above us somewhere and I heard the person turn. Instantly I threw myself out of my hiding place, my sights instantly lining up with the scared looking soldier stood facing the pews. I fired three hissed shots at almost point blank range, each striking him heavily in the back. He turned slowly, his rifle dangling from one hand and looked at me for a moment, almost confused before crashing to the floor. Ledorf's face and rifle appeared at the base of the stairwell almost immediately, but upon

seeing me lower my weapon he lowered his own. We lifted the body and shoved it into the confessional booth I'd just exited. I lifted my weapon from the altar and that of the Russian whilst Rasmus examined the corpse.

"Nice shooting Leutnant," he said finally and walked back toward the stairs to the tower, I followed him reluctantly, not entirely sure I wanted to.

Seven came upon us quicker than I'd have liked. Slowly a motorcade made up of five armoured personnel carriers pulled into the square west of us and Rasmus lay down to steady his shot. I lay next to him, a pair of binoculars steadied in my hands, staring across toward the cars. An entourage emerged from a nearby building and began to climb into the cars, but there was no sign of Chernenko and I was beginning to think we'd been misinformed.

Suddenly he strode out of the building, a small boy standing next to him, no more than six years old. By the blonde hair on his head and the finery he was dressed in, I had to assume that this was Chernenko's son. I waited for several seconds expecting Rasmus to shoot at any moment, but nothing happened. I looked to him, expecting to see a cool, calculating expression, but rather seeing a man in inner turmoil, his face was drawn into an intense frown. I had no idea what to do but as I watched his finger began to slowly squeeze on the trigger. I suddenly felt a lurch in my stomach that could only mean one thing.

"Rasmus, no!" I roared, but I was too late and the Dane pulled the trigger.

The funny thing about wards is that they work in a way that those who don't understand the theory can't properly comprehend. The image most people have in their minds is a giant sphere, a shield suspended around a focal area. A ward is more accurately an enchantment within everything in its perimeter; the soil, the buildings, the air and most importantly the people. Those attuned to these subtle magics can sense their presence, humming through the air around them, vibrating through their bodies and affecting their own magic.

It was for this reason, that at the moment the suppression wards fell in Aluksne, I felt my stomach drop through my chest. It was for this

reason that the bullet that Rasmus had so accurately aimed at Chernenko's forehead was suddenly jettisoned at a ridiculous angle from the Ukrainian. It was for this reason that Chernenko's son instantly died.

I watched horrified from the church tower as the child collapsed like a ragdoll, even from here I could see the spurts of blood as they sprayed across his father's face. I stood rooted to the floor, my entire stomach clenched and my lungs breathless. Rasmus moved quicker than I thought possible and dragged me toward the staircase. My body just collapsed in his arms and we toppled down the first flight of stairs crashing to the balcony below. Not two seconds later, the top of the tower was obliterated by a meteoric fireball that rained fire upon the entire church. I wrenched myself to my feet but my legs felt hollow and I could only stumble.

Rasmus pulled me toward the second staircase but I wrenched my arm free. Our eyes met for a moment, but all I could see were Krum's and his silent, begging message. Suddenly, as if I'd been planning it for days, I pulled Rasmus' sidearm free and shot him twice in the chest. He collapsed backward down the stairs and I followed him at a slightly slower pace, the gun still raised. Rasmus lifted his head again slightly and so I shot him again, the suppressor doing its job well, only an almost inaudible hiss escaped the gun.

"I'm sorry Rasmus, I truly am."

The Dane lifted his head slightly and whispered something, inaudible to above the crackling inferno above us. I crouched closer and he repeated himself.

"I knew you were going to do that," he said, blood rattling in his lungs.

"You didn't stop me," I replied, it wasn't a question. Rasmus' smiled broadly and blood ran from the side of his mouth.

"If thou do that which is evil, be afraid'," whispered the Dane stonily. "For he is the minister of God; he is a revenger to execute wrath upon him.' I have done much evil Leutnant, forgive me."

He gripped my hand momentarily, pressing something tight against my hand, then his grip relaxed and his head lolled to one side. I rose

away from the Dane and looked into my hand, a simple beaded rosary hung from my fingers. I pushed it into my pocket and looked around; fire was consuming the building around me. I could leave Rasmus here and trust that he would not fall to enemy hands.

I took stock of my situation, my rifle had been immolated with the tower above but I still had two side arms and the shotgun strapped to my leg. I unstrapped it and removed my wand from the holster by my left thigh. I sliced the barrels off neatly with a strong cutting curse, dropping three quarters of the barrel to the floor. Holding it in my right hand and my wand in my left, I descended the stairs as it opened out onto a balcony overlooking the church.

I was immediately face to face with a Russian soldier, who looked almost as surprised to see me as I was to see him. I reacted quickly however and caught him a blow with the shotgun, striking him just under the jaw. He reeled against the banister and I had a split second where I could hear more soldiers coming up the stairs behind him. I threw myself into the soldier, breaking the handrail clean through and plummeting to the ground. I twisted my body as I fell; turning enough to fire an exploding curse at the three soldiers below, obliterating the staircase, shards of wood splintering in every direction.

I landed heavily upon the soldier, who broke my fall just enough to allow me to escape unharmed. As I rose, a barrage of bullets cascaded through the church, splintering pews around me. I dived to the floor again, sliding between two rows as flecks of wood showered me. I lay very still, listening to the soldiers move around me, impeded slightly by the racing heartbeat in my ear. I saw the feet of one soldier moving the other side of the pew I was sheltering behind and I gently cocked the shotgun, making as little noise as possible.

Then swiftly and in one smooth move, I fired one of the chambers into the soldier's foot, eliciting a bloodcurdling scream of pain. At the same time, I rose from my position banishing the pew forward not just striking the Russian a deadly blow but also turning it into my bullet shield. I spun a quarter circle to my left, raising the shotgun under my left arm and firing point blank into the face of another soldier. I dropped back down behind the pews as a second hail of bullets levelled more woodwork around me.

I tossed the now useless shotgun to the side and seized one of the side arms from my belt. I flung one of the pews further from me to cause a distraction and was rewarded with a third storm of gunfire. I moved as soon as I'd thrown the pew, charging down the right side of the church, not even pausing as I emptied three rounds into the chest and face of a man in my path. As I reached the altar I let my feet slow, propelling me into a forward slide along the polished floor, bullets ricocheting off the stonework above me.

Using the slight step between the altar and the pews to my advantage, I rolled forward out of my slide and behind the altar. I kept my head low and almost instantly bullets began to crash against it and straight through the other side, missing me by millimetres. I dropped the magazine on my pistol and examined it; four rounds.

The gunfire ceased and I remained perfectly still once more until I could hear footsteps drawing very close. With a flick of my wand I flung the altar in the direction of the footsteps and rose, firing all four of my shots at the remaining soldier.

Every one of them missed, but forced him to take cover. I discarded my side arm. I was in the process of drawing Ledorf's when the soldier I thought I'd killed with the altar raised his rifle and fired at almost point blank range. The high calibre round tore straight through my stomach and passed out the other side and I almost reeled to the floor.

I kept my feet long enough however to kick down on the butt of his rifle as I collapsed, the business end catching him in the face and flipping the entire rifle toward me. As soon as I hit the floor I hit him with the killing curse, the green strike eliminating all traces of life from his face. With a prodigious reflex I caught the rifle as it fell toward me and fired in the direction of the last soldier who had popped from his hiding place to riddle me with bullets. By some pure fluke of chance, the bullet caught him in the throat and I watched with grim satisfaction as it pumped blood against the very pillar he'd been hiding behind.

For a moment I lay very still and there was almost perfect silence around me. Slowly as my ears readjusted I began to hear spatters of gunfire in the distance and the raging of the inferno that was slowly gripping the entire church. Gingerly and holding my side tight I rose

from the ground and surveyed the damage around me. The church was littered with broken pews and people. I lifted the rifle with me as I rose; I had almost nothing in the way of pistol ammunition and precious little strength for much magic. Reaching inside my chest pocket, my fingers located the little vial of unbreakable potion.

The potion was theoretically supposed to restore a wounded soldier to full strength, not by easing his fatigue or healing his wounds, but by making him so high that he doesn't notice either. With a little prayer to whatever deity was listening, I threw the potion down my throat and began to stagger toward the doors of the church. I had taken perhaps three paces when they were thrown inward in an incredible explosion that almost toppled me from forty feet away. When I'd regained my ability to see properly, I found myself staring across the church into the furious eyes of Fadei Chernenko.

I was immediately captivated with how powerfully built the man was. He was tall and broad, with shoulders that wouldn't have looked out of place on a gorilla. Unlike the other powerful sorcerers I'd come face to face with, who all had an inherent elegance in the way they moved, Chernenko walked with all the grace of a rhinoceros. Not only was he a giant of a man, I noted, but also vastly ugly; his head was too large for his features and his face looked like he'd had one too many run-ins with a brick wall. What caught my attention the most, however, was the tiny spark of recognition in his eyes.

"Harry Potter," he said and I immediately forced thoughts of my mother to the forefront of my mind. Chernenko smiled viciously at me, displaying his hideous teeth to their full extent. "I don't need Legilimency to know your name, assassin."

"Oooh. How impressive," I replied in a mocking drawl. "What'll be your next trick, I wonder? Pulling a rabbit out of a hat perhaps?"

"How about sawing a man in half?" he replied, the threat evident in his voice. "But first, tell me Mr. Potter, what do you suppose the chances of you being sent to assassinate me coincidentally coinciding with my departure to peace talks with your father?"

I gaped at him for a moment, if what he said was true, the implications were exceptionally significant; someone wanted this war to happen, someone would profit from this war. Riddle? The

Emperor himself? I re-focused my attention on Chernenko, who was now wearing a superior smile as he stared back.

"Rest assured Mr. Potter, that I will not allow my son's death to interrupt the peace conference if your father manages to do the same."

"You're rather self assured for a half-ogre," I mocked, jerking my head at his ruined face.

It seemed to get under his skin, for his face broke into a snarl, somehow making his face even more repulsive. "These are your last words, Mr. Potter; you'd do well to make them a prayer."

"I don't need divine intervention to wipe the floor with you," I baited, bouncing on the balls of my feet slightly, testing my wounds. I couldn't feel a thing; the potion had done its job admirably.

"That is exactly what you need." Grinned Chernenko, his eyes glittering in anticipation. "For you'd need the power of a god to fight a god."

"Full of yourself, aint'cha?" I replied, slipping back into English.

Chernenko simply raised his wand to me. I chose to reply; rising into a duelling pose and levelling my wand at him. There was a moment of pause, during which we both instantly assessed the situation, the calm before the storm. Then instantly it was broken, our first curses crossing in midair.

I had decided to open with something mainstream, mediocre and pathetic. He didn't even move his feet as he batted it straight back at me. I spun to the side, dodging both his and my curses and used the turn to mask the next curse I used. Our curses met in midair with a sound like a whip crack.

We held our curses for a moment, our wands still pointing at each other and gazed at each other appraisingly. I saw the slight shift in his weight before he'd cast his curse and I batted it away with a slash of my wand. I evaded a second curse by rolling my left shoulder back but it still managed to sear my shoulder as it passed. I was captivated by the sheer power of Chernenko's spells, god or not, he was certainly doing a good impression of one.

After the first flurry of spellfire, I allowed myself to settle into the duel, fighting exactly as I'd trained; my footwork, spellwork and form perfect. For each step he made I made one in response, for each curse I had a block, for each feint I was ready. I lost myself in the movements, each curse and block falling in with the next; an incessant stream of movements and curse-light. Chernenko for his part was equally as fluid, if not negligently so, with his movements. All his wand movements seemed lacklustre but his curses hit my blocks like a sledgehammer; powerful and crude.

I decided a little finesse was in order and so after dodging another blistering curse, I took a second of concentration to animate one of the statues by the door. The few moments I spent stationary cost me dear, a cutting curse catching me in the shoulder. The power behind the spell actually made my body recoil and I made a half turn as a crimson spurt of my blood sprayed from the wound. I grimaced and luckily kept the presence of mind to move as a second curse whistled past. My animated statue stood with a crunching of rocks; dust and flecks of marble falling to the floor, the noise attracted Chernenko's attention.

He was unable to react quickly enough however as the statue struck him a blow that sent him reeling. Whatever protective enchantments he was using seemed to give him a near invulnerability; as the blow he'd just taken would have slew a man straight out. My assessment was reinforced when the second blow from the statue struck him in the ribs, and lifted the wizard clean off his feet.

Chernenko fell back, clearly winded and I raised my wand to finish it. Before I had a chance however, he flicked his own wand up at the statue and with an incomprehensible roar blew one side of it away with a blasting curse. The air was suddenly filled with flecks of pulverised stone and a fine marble dust and I could no longer see clearly enough to aim a curse.

I moved as quickly as possible; a sound tactic considering a killing curse tore through the air where I'd previously been. As the dust cleared, revealing Chernenko standing tall amongst the wreckage of my charmed statue, I aimed a severing curse toward his legs and dropped low as his own bludgeoning curse tried to cave my face in. My curse caught him unaware and I was gratified to see a spray of blood as it dug into the outside of his thigh.

It was the first blood I'd drawn and I allowed myself a little glimmer of relaxation. Perhaps this was not going to be as difficult as I'd anticipated. No sooner had I thought that, however, than the wound I'd inflicted on Chernenko healed right over and he stood and laughed at my horrified expression.

"I told you child, the blood of Eurynome runs through my veins; I am the god of Death, the devourer."

He fixed me with a spine chilling gaze and then smirked. With a trifling flick of his wand he transfigured three of the benches still standing into giant spiders. I stared for a moment, my mouth hanging open, refusing to believe that he'd transfigured three Acromantula with a single wand movement. Reacting as soon as I could pull my jaw off the ground, I struck the spider closest to me with a blasting curse that ricocheted off the creature's hide and into the ceiling above.

The fire from the tower had apparently spread to the roof because the blasting curse brought a torrent of burning debris down upon us. Working completely on instinct, I banished a falling roof tile which buried itself in the face of one of the Acromantulas. A second leap at me through a cloud of putrid smoke and I dived out of its path.

The second was upon me before I could even think and I spent several panicked seconds on the floor attempting to avoid its huge mandibles. A vicious bludgeoning curse tossed it across the room, leaving a trail of gore in its wake. Quickly I rose and turned to fight the other, quickly ducking a swipe from its legs and rolling beneath its abdomen.

"Avada Kedavra!" I roared, the brilliantly green hiss of magic thundering from the end of my wand, killing the spider instantly. It collapsed upon me, its thick protective hide sheltering me from a barrage of curses Chernenko had just sent my way. I waited for a moment to catch my breath, trying hard to ignore the oppressive smell of the dead beast above me. Then with an almighty push of my arms, flicked the spider over, catching more spells with its hard exoskeleton. I spun out from behind it and flashing my wand down in a spiral, I roared "Inimicacendius!"

A monstrous titan of hellfire exploded from the end of my wand, it rose to seven feet tall, the heat radiated from the burning figure immolating everything around it; the entire church erupted into plumes of fire and smoke in a split second. The fiendfyre pounced at Chernenko, grabbing his face with both hands. His scream of fury and agony rent the air. I was distracted for a moment by two more Russian wizards running through the doors of the church. They stopped suddenly, eyes wide at the sight of my golem, now holding the charred body of Chernenko in a bear hug. I quickly set the golem on them and it dropped Chernenko's remains to lumber toward them, chasing them from the church.

I paused a moment to wipe a foul mixture of blood and soot from my face. A killing curse screeched past my head, causing me to duck and spin away instinctively, I looked wildly around for the source of the curse and my stomach lurched sickeningly as I found it. The blackened, carbonized figure of Chernenko had risen to its feet, the burns sweeping back over his body to reveal unblemished skin.

For several seconds I could do nothing but stand and stare in horror, allowing Chernenko to close the difference between us and throw another deadly green curse I had to scramble to avoid. I returned a killing curse of my own, but he met it with a lump of stone ripped from the floor. I shielded two curses and allowed him to get closer. As he aimed another killing curse at me, I spun to the side, breaking my shield and drawing incredibly close to him. With not enough time to strike him with my own killing curse, I swiped my wand at him and a bright purple flame struck him across the chest, knocking him to the ground.

Again I was thwarted as I raised my wand to finish him, his disarming hex ploughing into me, sending my wand and me in different directions. He rose laboriously at the same time I began to drag myself over to my wand, my fingers were within a hair's breadth of the polished holly handle when he rolled me over with the toe of his boot and pointed his wand into my face.

"Valiantly fought, Mr. Potter," he said, his eyes and voice alight with his pleasure in the fight, his satisfaction in victory and his thirst for my blood. "Well trained and resourceful to the end."

"It was hardly a sporting duel," I said, my eyes on his but my mind on the wand half an inch from my fingers.

"This is not a game, unfortunately. This is war and all the more glorious for it." He must have caught my confusion in my eyes because he laughed and explained. "Mr. Potter, whatever shall we do, men like we, when there are no more wars to contain us, no more bloodshed and death to appease our thirst?"

"You think me a monster like you?"

"Not a monster, Potter, a soldier. You were born for this Harry; it's evident in your voice, in your eyes, in the way you move-"

His monologue was broken by the reappearance of my fiendfyre. Chernenko turned his head just in time to catch a face full of burning wreckage that it hurled across the church. He staggered away, clutching his blistering face and I leapt to my feet, grabbing my wand and drawing Ledorf's handgun. There was one bullet left in it and a tap of my wand against the magazine transfigured the bullet to silver.

Chernenko turned to me, his face already perfectly healed as I raised the pistol in both hands. As our eyes met there was a moment between us that seemed to last far longer than it actually did. Finally, I exhaled and fired the single silenced round into his chest at point blank range. The silver bullet ripped through his enchantments and through his heart, passing straight through his body. Chernenko collapsed to his knees, his eyes glazed and I ran for it, experience telling me it wouldn't be long before he was on his feet again.

Chapter III

To say that Andro Milisovic grossly underestimated the effects his actions would have on not only Mugglekind, but also Wizardkind, would hardly begin to describe the repercussions of the assassination of Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand. Suddenly, all over the world, Wizards who watched the First World War rage and saw the power inherent in Mugglekind began to involve themselves in the affairs of their non-magical counterparts. Whether this be making a small fortune by discreetly manipulating market prices on goods and converting this into galleons, or by using bewitched muggles as easily disposable and deniable minions.

It was this that ultimately led to a young wizard by the name of Gellert Grindelwald to find himself propelled to a sudden position of authority amongst wizarding circles in Europe. For upon the declaration of the Great War, Grindelwald revealed himself and the entire wizarding world to the Austro-Hungarian Emperor and pledged his allegiance to the crown. Unlike Andro Milisovic, Grindelwald was certainly not a patriot. He acted out of purely selfish reasons and this was obvious to every wizard in Europe. The Emperor however, blinded by his greed trusted the sorcerer implicitly. Perhaps he sensed something of himself in Grindelwald for both men were driven by the same desire for power and control that has driven wizard and muggle alike for countless centuries.

While ostensibly a wizard of poor bloodline, Grindelwald was nothing if not a man of grand ideas and great words and quickly, as zealous men so often do, he attracted a crowd of sycophants, adulators and followers. Grindelwald, with a taste of the power he so craved, lead his followers in a devastating attack upon the unprepared wizards of Western Europe. Having learned from the mistakes of Andro Milisovic, he first irrevocably crippled the International Confederation of Wizards, massacring their hitwizards and leaving them unable to intervene. Then Belgium, Luxembourg and France were all swiftly incapacitated and Grindelwald, assuming Britain's neutrality, was content to turn his attentions eastward toward Russia.

Though powerful, Grindelwald ultimately proved to be as naive as he was young. With no experience of war, he made two major mistakes. Firstly, he fought only wizards, ignoring the muggle war altogether and secondly, stopped short at the English Channel. It would be these two mistakes that would undo him.

As I fled Aluksne my mind was racing, the words of Chernenko had left a bitter taste in my mouth. It seemed far too unlikely a coincidence that I'd been sent to assassinate Chernenko with peace talks on the horizon. The more I thought of it, the more conclusive it seemed to be; whomever planned it had obviously arranged for me to be there, an extra insurance that the peace talks would fail even if we were unable to kill Chernenko, either I'd kill him or far more likely it was assumed that if I were to die at his hand, my father would refuse to negotiate with the Ukrainian.

With this worrying chain of events fixed in my mind, I began to try and deduce who'd planned it. Riddle had certainly organised the unit, but I doubted he would have been as overt if he was involved in such a plan. Krum was a distinct possibility, it'd been him that had sent me up into the tower, but I couldn't see how he'd profit from the war continuing. He was Eastern European however; it was possible that his loyalties lay not with the Empire but with the USSR.

The more I considered it, the more likely it seemed that Krum was somehow involved, not that it mattered. My most pressing concern at the moment was certainly the hordes of Russian soldiers that were undoubtedly hot on my tail. Luckily for me, this area of Latvia was heavily wooded and I was able to disappear amongst the trees with little trouble. I pulled out of Aluksne moving south east, hoping that moving further from Riga and safety would disorientate anyone attempting to track me. Somehow I ended up on the main road leading south from Aluksne which I followed for a little while, walking in the ditch as to avoid any motorized patrols in the area. Looking behind me, the skyline of Aluksne was illuminated by fire. The gunfire and explosions had long died away and I wondered which, if any of my comrades would have survived the fighting.

I stopped to rest at the sign that marked the approach to the town of Aluksne, a slightly surreal concrete 'A' that rose out of the ground. I sat down behind it, using it to shield me from the road and took a moment to inspect my wounds. The potion was beginning to wear out and my uniform was soaked in blood. I pushed sterilized gauss into the wound and closed it up the best I could with the needle and thread in my aid kit, hoping it would ease the bleeding. It was hardly the most hygienic method of healing and I couldn't close the exit wound, but it avoided using magic and I didn't want to attract people to my location. It would do for now.

Slightly more comfortable and less worried about bleeding to death; I tried to form a plan of action. One possibility would be to return to Riga and rejoin my unit, as though nothing had happened and see where things developed from there, use the system to fight my battles. But in this case, I imagined that the murder of Rasmus would be very easily used against me. My only other realistic alternative was to return to England and use my father's status to protect me whilst I attempted to deduce who was responsible for the situation.

It was the latter plan that made the most sense and put me the furthest from harm's way. It would involve technical desertion but I could escape that with a fine. The biggest problem I'd face would be returning to England, I'd have to make my way across Europe without being noticed by whoever had engineered the situation. I'd have to start by going to Riga and from there plan to get back to England as soon as possible, trying to reach England before it was noticed that I wasn't dead.

I apparated to Riga, materialising in an alley not far from the hotel. I hoped that my apparition wouldn't raise too much suspicion, as I would be identified as a member of the Imperial Army. I quickly cleaned the blood from my uniform and repaired the damage sustained in the battle in Aluksne.

I turned right out of the alley, heading toward the hotel. The weather in Riga had become mild, the sun was blotted out by light grey clouds but the air felt close and humid. Though there was no sign on the horizon, I couldn't help but feel that a storm was coming.

I passed a small shop on the corner of the road to the hotel that I must have passed a dozen times during the week I'd spent in Riga, but this time, something attracted my attention through the window of the store; my name. I made a quick double take and headed into the store and picked the offending newspaper up from the display. Blazoned across the front page was a headline that made my blood run cold.

'Lord Potter Accused of Treason'

I stood for a few minutes staring at the headline, my brain completely unable to comprehend what I was reading. I glanced

over the newspaper at the others on the display and saw that they all bore the same headline. The shop proprietor appeared at my elbow.

"Just had them delivered sir," he said in frail German. "Hot off the presses, I'll give you it for a Bulsha, special price for you."

"Thank you," I said, pushing the coin into his hand, not even bothering to look at him. My heart was beating even faster than it had during the fight with Chernenko, I felt more terrified than I had ever felt before in my life. This was clearly no coincidence, someone had declared war on the Potter name and I was almost certainly next. Though only hours ago I'd been fighting for my life, this was far more dangerous than any single wizard; here I'd be fighting the entire system I'd dedicated my life to.

I knew I only had a slim margin of advantage, where my shadowy opponents would believe I was missing in action or dead and this gave me a chance of escape. Or alternatively, it gave me a chance to strike back when they least expect it. I was once again faced with two extremely unappealing choices; fight or flight.

In the end it was a split second decision I knew at the time I'd probably regret for a long time, but I'd run too much already, I'd fled from Chernenko, fled from Aluksne and for the first time I was presented with the upper hand. I knew exactly where my plan of action should start; Krum.

I apparated through the wards with all the grace and brevity of a cruise missile. My sudden arrival had probably set every alarm in the building ringing shrilly, but I knew I'd have at least two minutes before they could significantly react. and although I'd have to strike fast, it gave me just enough time to do what I needed to do.

I walked briskly through the hotel's second floor, brushing past soldiers and paper pushers; I was still in uniform so for the most part I was beyond notice or suspicion. Fortunately when I reached the small staircase that'd take me up to Krum's office, there was nobody around, so I was able to ascend unchallenged.

It's strange; give people something powerful like a wand and they very quickly become stupid, they'd rather take the short simple option, like blowing a door off its hinges, rather than taking perhaps

half a minute to use their wand in a more elegant and sophisticated way, such as using it to drill through a thin plaster wall and unscrew the hinges from the inside. This has not only the added benefit of being classy, but is also a good way to maximize your own protection when people come looking for you.

Krum's office was predictably dingy, a single dirty bulb casting a feeble and flickering light on a mahogany desk piled with papers. A lone fireplace was embedded into the wall behind it. I set to work immediately, working my way through the reams of paper; looking for anything pertaining to the mission that'd so spectacularly failed, looking for anything related to my father's peace talks or arrests. Predictably, I found nothing.

I was dimly aware of raised voices and echoing footfalls from the floors below but I still desperately searched for what I needed. The only remaining place to look was inside the single drawer which was securely locked. I drew my combat knife and pushed it into the crack between the top of the draw and the desk. Then, heaving heavily upward I forced the lock on the drawer, splintering the wood as I tore the entire drawer free. As the lock mechanism was wrenched from the wood, I realised my mistake, I'd become stupid in my haste. The drawer erupted into flames and shrieked deafeningly at me. If those voices and footfalls hadn't been coming in my direction before, they certainly would be now.

With a muffled curse I tried to extinguish the flames with my wand to no avail. Reaching desperation I tipped the drawer onto the floor and gave it a hefty kick, spilling its contents free. I snatched up anything that wasn't immolated by Krum's curse and pushed them into my jacket. I could hear shouts on the other side of the office door, the soldiers responding to the alarms and screams were clearly unimpressed with Krum's protective charms which were now working to my advantage.

With a quick "Incendio!" I set the rest of Krum's office ablaze, not strictly necessary, but it satisfied my desire for revenge at least slightly. I turned to the fireplace and seized a handful of floo powder from the pot above the fireplace. I lit the fireplace with a flick of my wand and threw the floo powder in. The flames instantly became emerald and I glanced around the office a final time before I stepped backward into the fire.

"Reception!" I roared above the noise of the flames licking around my ears. There was the briefest delay before I was whisked away during which the office door burst open and I found myself staring into the surprised face of Lord Riddle. In the same instant we both raised our wands, but I was snatched away by the floo before either of us could cast a curse.

I stepped elegantly out of the fireplace in the reception, only to find myself at the wands of three wizards, the markings on their uniforms identifying them as Schutzstaffel. There was a tense moment where I wondered if they were going to just blow me away, they outnumbered me and were too far away for me to have any real chance if they started throwing curses around.

"Leutnant Potter," spoke the one in the centre as he stepped forward, holding his hand out. "Relinquish your wand immediately."

My blood ran cold as I stared into his angular face, a knot in my throat tightening by the second. His pale cheeks were flushed with the thrill of success and his cold eyes flashed menacingly. I knew that going quietly pretty much amounted to being cut down in this lobby, with the added perks of torture and humiliation. I'd already faced down one of the greatest wizards alive earlier in the day and escaped with my life; I still had a chance if I fought.

In the end, it was his step forward that saved my life. Even as I moved my wand in an upward spiral to in a pre-emptive attempt to block the first curse I knew was going to be flung my way, I saw my opponents lip curl into a thin smile. He knew how easy this was going to be. He'd flicked his wand upward to prepare for his curse when the air was rent with a sudden roar followed shortly by incredible noise like a thunderclap.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on my back, pain radiating from every part of my body. There was grit and dust in my eyes, ears, nose and mouth. The world around me was distorted somehow, as though I was looking at it through a very thick piece of glass and my ears rang, obscuring all sound around me. I tried to wipe my eyes clean but found my arm trapped by the Schutzstaffel that had only moments ago been trying to arrest me, now he was completely still, a long section of piping wedged through his chest. His mouth hung open and dripped blood onto my wrecked uniform.

Slowly and with an inhuman amount of effort I pulled my arms free of his corpse and reached up to wipe the dust from my eyes. The air was full of dust and there didn't seem to be anyone standing in the lobby. The room's ceiling seemed to have been caved in by some sort of explosion, I had no idea what was going on, but I quickly came to two conclusions; that I couldn't have asked for a better piece of luck and that it was time to make a hasty retreat.

I'd just made it to my feet when almost a dozen witches ran through the front doors, brandishing their wands in a distinctly aggressive manner. I was still completely at a loss as to what was happening, but after a split second of indecision, I leapt over the hotel's front desk, narrowly avoiding the killing curse aimed in my direction.

One of the witches called out in something I recognised as Ukrainian, meaning that they were most probably an USSR unit of some kind. They didn't seem particularly well trained however, so I guessed that they weren't spies or commandos or some other elite unit, as if they were they'd have followed the killing curse with something explosive and finished me off.

I was just trying to formulate a plan when my attention was drawn to the stairs by a volley of curses. One struck a witch in the throat and felled her instantly, the other curses forcing the Ukrainians to shield or take defensive positions. The volley of curses was immediately followed by Lord Riddle and another wizard, who continued to push the Ukrainians on the defensive. The accompanying wizard seemed to be of the standard SS type, competent and dependable, but severely average. Riddle on the other hand was fighting like ten men; appearing to be able to curse, shield and manoeuvre at the same time. I instantly accepted all the stories about him as gospel.

Once again I found myself in turmoil; there were at least ten witches between me and the only exit, Riddle would surely be able to best them, but that would leave me with Riddle between myself and the exit. If I were to aid him, he'd probably curse me in the back and if I aided them, the Ukrainians probably curse me in the back, if Riddle didn't butcher me first.

In the end, I decided to attack the Ukrainians and try and barge my way out of the building. Riddle and the SS at least seemed to want me alive, while the Bolsheviks would certainly rejoice my death. This decided, I leapt the counter and began on the offensive.

Lying directly before me, spread eagle on the floor was one of the Schutzstaffel who'd held me at wand point earlier; standing over him was a thin, graceful looking witch who turned to face me in evident surprise. There was a streak of blood across her face and her wand rose to my face.

I stepped toward her cutting curse, parrying it away with an upward spiral of my wand before quickly bringing it down again to bat another spell into the floor where it exploded in a shower of sparks. Her third curse was slightly misaimed, favouring my right shoulder, allowing me to roll my upper body away from it. I used the momentum from the twist to turn in a full circle, leaving myself plenty of time to intercept her next hex with a shielding charm which diffused her attack with the sound like a kettle drum. The colliding spells caused a slight recoil of my wand hand which I promptly into an under armed piercing curse that tore through her stomach and knocked her off balance.

Sensing victory, I followed up my piercing curse with a bludgeoning curse that caught her in the face, felling her instantly and leaving her a crumpled a bloody mess on the stone floor. Instantly the witch next to her jumped forward to continue her duel, making me wonder why they didn't just form an orderly queue. They were clearly not combat trained witches as none of the other seemed to want to involve themselves in our duel, fortunate for me, because the one that I fought now seemed to possess at least some level of skill.

She opened with a beautifully cast obscuring charm that fluttered from the end of her wand like a vast ribbon. I only recognised it for what it was at the last moment and I'd barely managed to jam my eyes shut before it exploded in a violent white light that would have surely blinded me otherwise. As it was, my temporary handicap was all she needed to sneak a Valkyrian piercing spell under my guard. The curse pierced my left thigh and set my uniform alight, distracting me long enough for the witch to step forward and level a killing curse at my face.

In one fluid motion I spun to the right, dodging the curse and seized her wrist and then heaved her toward me, wrapping her arm around her own throat and holding the witch as a human shield. Reacting quickly the Ukrainian witch pushed powerfully backward, tipping me off balance and cracking my back onto the counter behind. I

released my grip on her arm and cast a bludgeoning curse, sending the witch flying across the lobby, obscuring me momentarily from the other Ukrainians.

It was just then that Riddle stepped in front of me, wand outstretched in order to defend my right side from another Ukrainian attack. He effortlessly blocked two curses and followed up with a blistering Foe Hammer curse that actually made the hairs on my arms stand up straight. With that witch floored, Riddle made a neat double take and blocked another curse that was aimed at his head. Before he moved forward again to counter attack, he reached out with his left hand and pushed something against my chest. I instinctively grabbed it and looked down; it was a Skitterleap disc.

The moment I saw it clasped in my fingers, I opened my hand to drop it but it stayed where it was, openly defying gravity. I quickly surmised that Riddle had applied a sticking charm to it and I tried frantically to dispel it before I ended up in a prison cell miles under Leipzig. However the charm was much too strong and I had far too little time and, much to my dismay, I felt the disc begin to activate.

I once again found myself hurtling through the vortex, crimson mist whizzing past my ears, inhuman sounds screeching through the veil around me. The creatures seemed immediately aware of my existence this time and every few seconds I'd see something lunge through the darkness and pass harmlessly through my body. With this worry somewhat absolved, my mind was free to worry about where I'd be heading, with Riddle's reputation and the scores of Schutzstaffel hot on my tails, I assumed I'd be on the torture table of some SS thug before the day was out. Alternatively, I'd heard of people whose Skitterleap was targeted into solid objects, never materialized and were presumably lost to the ether for eternity.

I was more prepared for my landing than I had been previously, as I began to feel myself re-materialize and my feet hit solid ground, I dropped into a combat roll, landing on one knee, my wand outstretched ready to curse my way out of the room. It took me a few moments to realise that I was completely alone. The room I was in looked like a traditional Skitterleap chamber, though the usually high powered lighting was turned off and the entire room was blanketed in a thick coat of dust.

Slowly, unsurely, I rose from one knee to my feet and conjured blue flames from the tip of my wand into the palm of my left hand, which I then raised like a torch. The blue flames illuminated the room, allowing my eyes to permeate the gloom a little better. Oddly enough the only thing that I could see around me that looked like it had been touched in the last decade or so was the Skitterleap disc, which sat malevolently on the floor where it had fallen from my hand.

Cautiously I picked it up from the floor, unsure as to whether I was going to be dragged off to somewhere new, but instead it just sat in the palm of my hand, the blue flames licking the sides of it, but leaving no marks upon its surface. As I looked at it, gold lettering began to spread across the surface, which simply read 'Corinthia Hotel, Tripoli, 324'.

Still puzzling over the meaning of the mysterious note, I looked around for an exit. On the other side of the chamber was a huge wrought iron door, which I cautiously approached. I was still utterly confused about my situation, unable to deduct who was on my side and who wasn't. I'd been sure that Riddle was there to arrest me, sure that his Skitterleap disc would deposit me in the hands of my enemies, but now it appeared that he was working with my best interests in mind and was looking to arrange a face to face meeting. Though of course it left the question; where was I now?

I wrenched the handle of the huge door downward and it swung outward in a shower of rust and dust. As I pushed it open, a blinding ray of sunlight hit my eyes, temporarily disorientating me. I dispelled the flames on my hand and stepped out into the bright sunlight, surprised at how warm the air felt against my skin.

Stretched out before me was a corridor made up of grape vines that seemed to continue forever, disappearing beyond the horizon. I turned around to face the chamber I'd just left and was surprised to see the doorway standing in thin air. The door opened to the dark chamber inside, but the chamber itself seemed to only exist inside the door. I couldn't be sure if the door was merely a gateway or if the chamber was disguised in some feat of bent reality, but it was certainly extremely impressive magic either way.

With far more confidence than I had, I swung the heavy iron door closed and it disappeared without a trace, leaving nothing but two long rows of vines stretching in the opposite distance. I reached out

and was relieved to feel the iron door still there; it appeared to be invisible from the outside. I turned my back on it and decided to try walking, the long corridor I was in had to lead somewhere.

Sooner than I expected the vines broke to the left and right, allowing me entrance into other similar corridors, all travelling in the same direction. Acting on impulse I turned left and began to walk, trying to find the end of the rows.

I walked for perhaps half an hour before I found any sign of civilisation, appearing almost as suddenly as though it had popped out of the ground, was a wall. It was almost 7 feet tall, meaning I couldn't see what the other side was and after a few moments of deliberation, I came to the conclusion that the worst thing that could be on the other side of the wall was another vineyard. With agility that betrayed my military training, I scaled the wall and perched myself on the top to survey the land around me.

From my vantage point, I could see for miles around me for the land in all directions were incredibly flat. On the other side of the wall was something that lifted my spirits considerably; a road. I dropped onto the road and looked up and down it when a sign a little way down the road attracted my attention, it read 'Toulon'. Instantly I began to smile broadly, I knew where I was and knew exactly where I was going.

It was with a weary joy that I approached the front door of the Delacour castle; I was exhausted from the ache from my wounds, the baking heat and the thirteen hour walk. Situated a little out of the French port town of St. Tropez, the red stone building looked beautiful under the light of the setting sun. The last heat of the blistering French summer afternoon gently warming my back, the fine perfume of the Mediterranean blossoms crept cloyingly into my nostrils.

I could have stood there forever, merely taking in the pleasant sensations. There, the fighting and death of Latvia seemed almost ludicrous. The idea that such things could exist in tangent with a place of such beauty seemed a sacrilege.

I stood there for a long time, weary but confident that my troubles would soon be at an end; Fleur would take me in and shelter me

from my pursuers long enough for her family to use their significant political weight to clean this blemish on the Potter name.

Eventually an icy whisper of wind curled around my bare shoulders, eliciting a shiver from my bruised and weary body and reminding me of the freezing night that was sure to follow such a warm day.

I dragged myself wearily to the front door of the châteaux, and by the time I reached it, I was barely able to lift the wrought iron door knocker. Never had I been more grateful for such a horrible sound.

Almost as soon as the handle had crashed into the base plate the door had opened, revealing a small army of house elves who bustled around me, offering hot towels, food, clothing and bed chambers in high pitched French.

"I need to speak with the Delacours immediately," I said insistently, appearing to disappoint all of the house elves whilst simultaneously thrilling them that they now had a task to perform.

Whilst several elves bade me to sit in the lounge in order to wait for the Delacours to grace me with their presence, another went to fetch Fleur, who, as I was repeatedly informed, the only member of the household who currently in residence at the Delacour châteaux, her parents currently residing in their Parisian apartment.

I collapsed heavily into a comfy chair before an unlit fireplace and allowed the elves to ply me with cups of tea and whatever food that they could find lying around, which is to say, enough food to see the Emperor's armies out for a year.

I'd not realized it until now, but I suddenly found myself incredibly hungry and tucked into the sumptuous feast with far more vigour than was entirely proper.

I only stopped eating when a giggle roused my attention. I glanced up to see Fleur in the doorway, dressed immaculately as always in a light blue summer dress that I couldn't help but notice revealed an awful lot of leg.

The relationship between Fleur and I had always had sexual undertones, despite that we'd known each other for almost our entire lives, as such is often the way with pureblood families. I'd not

seen her since I'd joined the army, a decision that she'd not particularly supported but if I could have chosen a single person I'd expect to always count on, it would have been Fleur.

When I looked up, Fleur had been wearing an expression of amusement, stemming from the spectacle of me stuffing my face with fancy French pastries, but as I looked up and full extent of my injuries and weary expression was revealed to her, her face fell into a contrite look of worry. She crossed the floor in seven swift paces and seized my face with one slender hand.

I marvelled for a moment at the cool touch of her fingers against my bruised face before she sharply jerked my head in the other direction in order to get a better look at the other profile.

"You have certainly been in the wars, no?" she demanded in French, the words slipping off her tongue in a cascade of distinctly Gallic accents. I flashed her a toothy but humourless grin.

"You might say that," I replied, wiping a mixture of dried blood and tea from my mouth.

"Oh Harry," she sighed and leaned down, seizing my lips in a tight but chaste kiss. "You are an idiot, little roast beef."

I took the jibe good naturedly and smirked at her. "Fleur, in the last forty eight hours I've fought Gods and burned cities, killed to avoid being killed, fought for my country, flew through the air in little more than stretched canvas and descended again to engage the enemy from behind. And I'd do it all again for another kiss from you."

She giggled and blushed, looking, for a split second, like the girl I remembered before her face became deadly serious once more.

"Harry," she began. "Do your army not have medics, should you not be in a hospital, getting these wounds attended too?"

"Well, that's just the thing actually," I replied, slipping back into English, my own face and voice serious now. "Fleur, someone's imprisoned my father, attempted to imprison me, dispatched SS assassins to kill me. I need your help."

Fleur stared at me for a moment, open mouthed, as though attempting to determine if I was lying, crazy or jesting. Eventually she must have made some decision, because she nodded and snapped her fingers, beckoning half a dozen impatient house elves.

"Get Lord Potter cleaned up, re-clothed and to bed," she ordered and then looked at me. "You're not in any state to anything but rest right now," she announced. "Get some sleep whilst I contact my father and attempt to ascertain who's responsible for this."

I'd barely nodded my thanks when a pair of house elves seized me each by a hand and dragged me off upstairs. Here I was drawn a bath and left to my own devices. Removing my clothes was a painful task, the thin material of my shirt stuck fast to my wounds by the dried blood. In some cases my body had scabbed over material.

At this point though, the pain seemed a trifle and I clambered into the bath, appreciating the hot foamy water more than I ever thought it possible. I allowed the searing heat wash away the grime, blood and sweat that had been accumulating on my body for two days. Slowly I slipped my head under the level of the water, holding my breath and lying there for as long as I could.

When I resurfaced Fleur had joined me in the bathroom, she stood against the sink, regarding me with interest, as though I was some specimen.

"I was wondering if I should send in divers to recover you," she said, without a trace of humour. I didn't reply, I was far too tired to deal with Fleur in one of her moods. She picked up a towel and held it at arm's length to me, averting her eyes.

I took it and climbed out of the bath, wrapped the towel around my waist and chuckled. "Why so modest Fleur? It's nothing you've not seen before."

She giggled too and turned to face me again. Her face fell into a mask of horror at the sight of my chest. She pushed me backward onto a small stool in the corner of the bathroom and crouched down to examine my wounds better. I too gazed down at it; I'd been far too eager to clamber into the bath earlier and hadn't even bothered to check the extent of the damage. It looked pretty severe from there.

The gunshot that had perforated my stomach seemed to have taken an odd red tinge that I suspected was infection, the numerous smaller cuts and gashes I'd obtained during the explosion in Riga were relatively clean and trivial, but all were weeping blood onto my skin.

Fleur rolled up her sleeve in the manner that meant she was about to perform magic. It was a curious trait that she'd persisted with since childhood, a tell-tale sign that her wand was not far from her mind. It took her seconds to repair the cuts sustained during the explosion, I could have done such trivial first aid, but she paused at the gunshot, clearly unsure how to progress with such an ugly and infected wound.

"Fight the infection," I urged her. "Then close it up, I'm pretty sure I've no internal injuries. The bullet went straight through so you'll need to do the same on the other side."

"You'll be lucky if you're not septic," snapped Fleur, glaring at me. "Why did you take so long before seeking medical attention?"

"I didn't really have a choice," I replied tiredly. "I'm not exactly going to be welcomed by field medics or hospitals at the moment, am I?"

She stared at me a moment longer and then shook her head and returned to her work. It took her about quarter of an hour to do a passable job of cleaning it up and repairing the skin and much of it was agonizing. By the time she'd finished I was beyond weariness and into the realm of sleepwalking. I was vaguely aware of collapsing onto a soft bed and someone drawing the sheets around me before I fell into a deep slumber.

My dreams were perforated with images of Chernenko who chased me throughout the night; his ever advancing and indestructible form stalking me through the dark twisting streets of Leipzig. His eyes flashing red as he closed in on me, his teeth expanding into fangs, his body morphing into a monstrous form of scales, muscle and claws.

I awoke suddenly into utter darkness, my heart pounding in my head and chest, the vicious red eyes of Chernenko haunting my mind's eye. I felt like I'd barely slept, but the wounds on my chest were no longer sore and the ache in my legs had all but subsided. I tossed

and turned for a few minutes, but sleep evaded me. I climbed out of bed and headed to the bay windows, opened the curtain and stared out into the night. I'd been located a room above the front porch of the house one that gave me a fantastic view of the expansive gardens before the house, which even at the dead of night was bewitched with an ethereal glow.

I spun on the spot as the door opened, revealing Fleur stood silhouetted against the light from the corridor. I relaxed slightly as she stepped into the room. Her eyes were crimson, as though she'd been crying, there were shadows under her eyes and her step was slightly stilted from exhaustion. I smiled in welcome and took a step toward her before I noticed her rolled up sleeve, somewhere in the back of my mind, alarm bells began to ring. I stopped walking towards her and instead circled toward the bed, surreptitiously glancing around, seeking my wand.

"What time is it?" I asked croakily, trying to sound more tired than I felt. I reached out and picked up some clothes that had been left on the dresser for me; a pair of jeans and a vest that looked like something I'd left last time I'd stayed at the chateaux. I shrugged on the vest and pulled the jeans over the underwear that had mysteriously appeared upon my person during the night; I took a moment to pray that it had been house elf magic rather than Fleur.

"Early," replied Fleur, her voice sounding constricted and her expression betrayed a conflict deep inside her. I found myself frantically searching for my wand. "Harry," she began, but paused and sighed. "You're in a lot of trouble Harry," she said. She looked at the floor and swallowed. "Your father has been arrested under suspicion of treason; you've been accused of the same charges. You've got Schutzstaffel swarming all over Europe searching for you."

I nodded and made an affirmative noise to let her know I was following and took a step toward her. She backed away and raised a hand angrily. "You brought this to my doorstep Harry," she snapped. "You brought your treachery and deceit to my family's house! You never should have betrayed the Emperor."

Suddenly I understood, Fleur in her roundabout way was letting me that there were Schutzstaffel closing in on me and was at the same time, protecting her family from reprisal as she was sure to be

interrogated about the events that transpired here. As I stared her in the eyes I saw them flicker almost imperceptibly toward the wardrobe and I understood immediately that she was indicating my wand but I made no move toward it, instead I gave her a wan smile and said, "Fleur, if you remember nothing else from tonight, let it be this; the only time I've ever betrayed the Emperor was beneath the beach tree in Nebo."

The look in her eyes indicated that she'd understood and I immediately pounced, seizing her around the waist and tossing her heavily into the wardrobe, which she bounced off with a sickening crunch. My wand rolled from the top of the wardrobe and deftly caught it, however doing so left me open to Fleur's curse which threw me backwards over the bed and left me sprawled across the carpet. By the time I'd risen Fleur had already cast her next curse which caught me full force in the forehead and sent me hurtling backwards, crashing through the bay windows and dropping me on to the arched porch roof.

I clattered downward, taking glass and tiles with me and dropped unceremoniously into a rosebush. I cradled my wand as I fell, trying to prevent it from being too badly damaged by the fall. I fell to my hands and knees as the bush sprang to life and pushed me away. I scrambled to my feet as quickly as possible and fled from the Delacour chateaux, conscious even as I ran of the easy target I provided fleeing across the brightly illuminated lawn.

Nonetheless, I reached the wall that bordered the Delacour property with no problems at all and scaled it like a monkey. Thankfully the magical protections were far more interested in keeping people out of the perimeter than keeping them in and I passed through without any problems at all. I nimbly dropped to the road on the other side and began to jog down the road away from the house. With the SS approaching it was advisable to put as much distance between myself and the house as I possibly could. I was sorely tempted to pick up the pace a little, knowing from experience that I could easily make a minute mile, but I knew in better judgement that I'd just end up burning myself out long before I reached any sort of settlement.

The last thing I wanted was to be caught out in the open at daybreak; it would make it far too easy for my pursuers to spot a lone target from the air. So I jogged at a respectable pace, trying to limit the expenditure of the little energy I still possessed and

although I became convinced very quickly that I wasn't being followed I knew they'd eventually begin to track me, so I continued running, pretty convinced I was heading in the direction of Ramatuelle. To my embarrassment, I was so pre-occupied with worrying about what was behind me that I completely forgot to pay attention to where I was heading.

As I rounded a bend, I came upon two cloaked and masked figures standing in the centre of the road. It was only the fact that they spoke that kept me from running straight into them.

"Look where you're going Leutnant," spoke the man on the left, startling me so much I tried to stop far too quickly and lost my footing on the slick gravel road, sliding to a halt at their feet. They both chuckled at me, it was a laugh that I half recognised and from one look at their attire I immediately knew who they were.

Both were dressed in the robes and mask of a Gestapo investigator, or as they were more commonly known to the people of the empire, the Faceless. These elite few are made up of wizards who are not particularly powerful or skilled, but rather those who were ruthless and vicious enough to be trusted to routinely torture and butcher their fellow human beings; men, women and children alike. Whilst this was worrying enough in my position, I knew these two particular investigators and I knew them well enough to be terrified of them.

They say that the training that the Faceless endure to become one of the elite few chosen either makes or breaks the participant and both had a place in the ranks of the Gestapo. What particularly terrified me about these two however, was that Fred and George Weasley were definitively broken before they set foot anywhere near a Gestapo training camp. Having seen the horrors they could inflict upon their fellow schoolmates at the age of fifteen, I certainly didn't want to find out what new tricks they'd learnt at the hands of the Emperor's sadists.

One of them removed their mask and I instantly recognised him as George from the lifeless grey ball that sat in the socket where his right eye should reside. I slowly rose, my fingers tightening around my wand as I did so, swallowing the lump that had appeared in my throat. George's face darkened with an excited, stilted grin at me that turned my blood to ice.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," He said reprovably as though disciplining a disobedient child. "A little birdie told me you've been a treacherous little snake. He said you've been whispering to the moon and biting the horses." He leant in close to my face, close enough for me to see my own reflection in his expressionless eye, close enough to smell his gory, putrid breath. "It told me all about the beach tree in Nebo Harry. And then I ate it, feathers and all."

I felt a hot flash of anger rise through me and it was all I could do to restrain myself from striking him. After a calming breath I looked coolly into his eyes and spoke dispassionately.

"Killed that little slut did you?" I asked, watching as the words made his eyes light up in excitement. "Saved me a job then, thanks George mate."

"Mates are you? Matey matey mates?" hissed his twin, Fred, circling behind me, snapping at the back of my neck with his teeth. He too had removed his mask now, it melting away to nothing in his hand. He giggled a high pitched laugh which reminded me of hyenas and sent a shiver up my spine. "Don't you lie to us like you lie to yourself Harry; we're not friends you and I, you and he. Don't spin your web of lies to my face, or I'll nibble nibble nibble on your skin." He giggled once more and rounded his brother, coming to stand at his side again.

"Do you remember Peeves, Harry?" asked George, a deranged, wistful smile creeping onto his lips. I nodded and he broke into a huge smile, Fred giggled again. "We ate him," announced George and made a disgusting sucking noise. "Slurped away his skin like he was flesh and blood, didn't we brother?" Fred nodded enthusiastically. I slowly began to rotate my shoulders, forming a plan of action while they babbled. Fred reached out and touched my face, his cold skeletal fingers lingering against the beard that had been developing on my jaw. I saw my opening and seized him firmly by the wrist, dragging him close as a shield and pushing my wand under his chin.

I stared defiantly into the eye of George who looked back with glee. "Do it!" he hissed, as though in triumph. "Kill him! Tear out his heart!"

I stood for a moment, my wand pressed into Fred's throat, my eyes locked with his twin's single good one and slowly I began to lower my wand. The light in George's eye faded away and I shoved his brother back to him roughly. Fred hissed angrily.

"Cowardly Potter's got no stones!" he cried in a sing-song voice as he sneered at me. I hexed him by way of reply.

Too many fights are decided before they're begun, one side will be too confident in their numbers, or too lax in their preparation or planning, or just simply outclassed. In this case the Weasley twins had made all three mistakes, they'd wasted time on words, believing that two of them could easily beat me, they'd allowed me time to plan, allowed me time to open the duel on my terms and I knew I could easily one while the other was incapacitated.

My spell struck Fred before he could even react, the purple light spreading across his chest like a ripple on a pond. I knew from the tightening of his jaw that his heart was beginning to speed up, beating harder and faster than it had ever done before, without help soon it'd tear itself.

George darted forward, his wand level and a viciously curved dagger raised in his other hand but I swatted him to the side with a flick of my wand. He fell to the floor and rolled a few feet on his side before leaping back to his feet and coming at me again. This time I didn't even use my wand as I sidestepped his lunge, grabbed the hand holding his knife and tossed him onto his back.

I quickly stamped down on his arm, forcing him to drop the weapon and stepped forward, delivering a vicious kick to his head. He screamed in anger and pain and rolled out of range of my kicks. I stepped over the knife and raised my wand to slay him. In a flash of pain and a scream I realised I'd made a mistake. I spun and saw the dropped dagger sticking out of my thigh, a triumphant looking Fred on his hands and knees next to me.

I fell awkwardly to my right, trapping my wand hand under my body as I pushed it out to steady my fall. In a heartbeat Fred was upon me, his hands scrabbling around my throat, his knees digging into my chest, his face reaching down to mine in a mad attempt to bite at my face. I turned my head away, drawing him closer as he tried to bite me again and then suddenly twisted my entire body in one swift

movement, delivering a head butt to his face with such power I was sure I felt his nose break.

I rose swiftly, catching a handful of dirt from the road as I did so and throwing it into the face of George, who'd rounded on me again. It did nothing to slow him down, but blinded him, giving me ample time to step aside, seize him by the back of his head and bring his face and my knee powerfully together. He fell limply to the road, stunned or unconscious, I wasn't sure but if his resilience was anything akin to his brother's, he wouldn't be down for long.

I took the moment's respite to pull the knife from my leg, hissing in pain as I did so and then turned to block Fred's curse, it was more powerful than I'd expected, but nothing spectacular. He'd apparently not dispelled my hex as well; he was clearly moving more clumsily, his breathing heavy and his eyes unfocused. I was just contemplating taking out my sadistic streak on him in revenge of Fleur when a curse flew narrowly over my head, forcing me to duck hastily. By the time I'd looked back up again, Fred had crumpled to the floor. I quickly looked around in search of origin of the curse.

Advancing down the road toward us, from the direction of the Delacour chateaux was a line of Schutzstaffel that I was entirely convinced had no intention of politely introducing me to Riddle. Luckily, one of them had broken a principle combat rule; never engage an unaware enemy until within range, giving me ample time to flee into the hedgerow, leaving the unconscious and possibly dead Weasley twins spread out on the road.

It was fairly easy to lose the Schutzstaffel amongst the fields, vineyards and olive orchards of the area; whilst I was used to the topography from countless days of playing hide and hex with Fleur as a child, they were clearly out of their element and it wasn't long before I'd left them in the dust.

I arrived at Ramatuelle at day break, just as the market merchants were laying out their wares for the day. I knew my pursuers weren't going to be far behind me, so I had to work quickly. I moved to one of the first market stalls I saw and picked up a t-shirt and some sunglasses, spending a moment to ask the merchant about quick footpaths to St. Maxime, I completely ignored the reply and thanked him, giving him slightly too much money. I moved onto the next stall

and purchased a couple of souvenir drinking glasses before disappearing down a back alley.

Walking the streets of Ramatuelle is slightly like stepping back in time; simply put, it's a village that time forgot. It arose during the Middle Ages and has simply refused to move forward since then, the invention of the motorcar has simply passed it by, leaving it a confusing entanglement of tiny alleys, some of them barely big enough to walk along, let alone drive a car down. Indeed, there are large parts of it that are not shown on any tourist map, where doors appear in the most illogical places and open into underground passages that lead to the other side of the village, under the church or in one interesting case, into someone's bathroom cupboard.

It was partly for these reasons that Ramatuelle was so perfect for me to hide in, the other primary reason was because it was here that I owned a safe house of sorts. In the days after leaving school and before joining the army, Fleur and I had spent two weeks here, close enough to her home to feel secure, but out of sight. Two weeks that had ended under a beech tree in Nebo, of all places.

I passed under a low arch and descended some curved stairs that lead behind the church, here I immediately doubled back and passed through a door built into the side of the stairs I'd just walked down. I had to stoop slightly to pass through the door and walk into the tunnel. I slammed the door behind me and moved quickly down the tunnel, unwilling to remain in it for very long, things quickly got out of hand if anyone ever needed to pass by in these cramped spaces.

I emerged at the other end into a brightly lit courtyard, someone in one of the rooms above me was playing the guitar and there was a strong smell of cannabis smoke that hung around the courtyard. I banged heavily on the first door on my right and immediately heard running feet from inside.

After a moment I heard the bolts on the door being drawn back and the door opened to reveal a tall, unshaven man with wild but thinning brown hair and perhaps four teeth. He looked even worse than the last time I'd seen him and I grimaced when I noticed his bandaged hand.

"Harry," he said, in an undecipherable tone of voice, last time he'd been far more pleased to see me.

"Luc," I greeted him, in a far warmer voice than he and patted him on the shoulder. "Not surprised to see me?" I asked, in mock disappointment.

"Well not after Fleur told me you would be," he replied evenly, his dark eyes now giving me a calculating stare. My heart leapt into my throat.

"Fleur?" I asked breathlessly, "Is she here?"

"No, but she was last night," replied Luc and my heart fell again. "I assumed she'd be with you."

I shook my head in disappointment and turned to move away, Luc grabbed me by the arm though and I turned to face him, his eyes betrayed urgency.

"Harry, there's a guy up there," he said quietly and pushed something into my hand. I looked down and saw it was a snub-nosed revolver. "He arrived about an hour ago, saw him from my window. I think he's one of those wizards, he was carrying a twig.

I half smiled at his paranoia about wizards, when Fleur and I had moved in we'd pretended to be muggles, to ensure our secrecy here and I'd never told Luc that I was anything but. I took the revolver and nodded my thanks. He gave me a last worried look and disappeared back inside his house, closing the door quietly. I moved across the courtyard, the gun held low so anyone looking from above would have a harder time spotting it.

I reached my door and gently pushed on it, the bolts sliding back slowly and quietly, Luc was right, if there was a man inside, he must be a wizard; nobody else could have opened my door. Inside the door was a steep flight of stairs which I ascended sideways, limiting my noise as I crept upstairs. I couldn't help but notice a trail of lit candles leading up the stairs that had certainly never been there before, by their shape and colour I assumed they were ever-glows, so I couldn't make a guess at how long they'd been burning.

Half way up, I reached up to the ceiling and quietly pushed my hand through the enchanted section of the ceiling, keeping my pistol trained on the door at the top of the stairs. After a moment of grasping around in thin air, my fingers closed on something cold and metallic and I pulled it down.

Grasped in my hand was a rare, superbly crafted baton sword. The essential principle of a baton sword is that it is a baton when you need a non-lethal deterrent for your opponents and a quick twist of the handle un-sheaths the blade concealed in the body of the baton, handy if your opponents decide that your non-lethal efforts aren't a deterrent.

I kicked open the door at the top of the stairs, sword raised in one hand and pistol outstretched in the other, I didn't want to use magic unless it was strictly necessary, and it would only serve to bring the Schutzstaffel down upon me. Apparently the man waiting for me had come to the same conclusion, because sat in an armchair opposite the door, aiming a pump-action shotgun at my face was Boone Halverson.

Chapter IV

Grindlewald's influence during World War One came to an abrupt halt when Albus Dumbledore, Grindlewald's childhood friend, interceded; ambushing, besting and embarrassing the Austrian wizard in 1918. Grindlewald had expected the support of Dumbledore, or at very least his non-involvement, having left Britain alone and his betrayal infuriated Grindlewald like nothing else in his life ever had.

Grindlewald fled Europe and disappeared amongst the chaos, his followers likewise dispersed and although they chided Dumbledore for sparing him, the people of Western Europe assumed that Grindlewald was finished. Likewise, Dumbledore assumed his old friend would think better of returning and settled into life as headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

However, once again, wizards removed themselves from the machinations of muggles, once again they showed their conceit, considering the affairs of the non-magical people below them and in September 1930, Hitler, an Austrian, and the Nazi Party won 107 seats in the Reichstag, making them the second largest party in Germany. Needless to say, Grindlewald kept a hand in muggle politics and as Hitler was appointed as Chancellor of Germany, Grindlewald returned to Europe and revealed the existence of the wizarding world to him.

Hitler, like all men driven by power, was tempted by Grindlewald's whispers of power beyond anything he could comprehend and granted Grindlewald German citizenship and a small position in government in exchange for his loyalty. Bound by their own laws and statutes, the International Confederation of Wizards were unable to directly involve themselves in the politics of muggles and so were unable to legally apprehend Grindlewald. Whilst the representatives from the France and the Low Countries attempted to push through hasty legislation that would revoke these rights for wizards, Germany seized territory in Austria and began to mobilize troops on the border with Czechoslovakia.

Once again unable to find isolation from muggle politics, the British Minister for Magic urged the British Prime Minister to act against the growing threat of both Hitler and Grindlewald, once again the communication and understanding between muggle and magical

worlds was exceedingly poor and Chamberlain was never made to understand the threat that Grindlewald posed to both worlds. Simultaneously, on the 22 of September 1938, Chamberlain approached Hitler with talks of peace and the combined British and French Ministries of Magic gave Grindlewald an ultimatum; step down or risk facing a united front of the two ministries.

They were ignored; on the first of September 1939 Hitler and Grindlewald invaded Poland and Grindlewald changed the world forever.

The German muggle blitzkrieg attack succeeded in ways far surpassing the original plan, the alliance with the USSR proving to be integral. Grindlewald's magical assault on the Polish ministry had proved far less effective, the Magical Minister of Poland ordering his aurors to fight a guerrilla war not just against Grindlewald's dark wizards but also against the muggle soldiers of Germany.

With Hitler's growing impatience for success, Grindlewald resorted to a tactic both he and the Polish Ministry had considered an impossibility. On the twenty second of November, Grindlewald in a feat of incredible magical ability destroyed Warsaw with a single spell.

Whilst it is tempting to imagine this feat as a huge explosion, a vast eruption of fire that destroyed everything in its path, the truth of the matter is that in the matter of a single moment, the entire city disappeared, taking with it everyone living within it.

Faced with devastation on this scale, the Polish aurors and what remained of the Ministry had no choice but to surrender. Grindlewald had completed what Andro Milisovic had started in 1916 and irrevocably merged the muggle and wizarding worlds.

"Alright Leutnant, lower your weapons," said a calm, familiar voice from my right. A quick flicker of my eyes in the direction revealed Diggory stood where he'd presumably been hiding beside the door, a pistol aimed at my head. On my other side, Thalburg picked himself up from the floor where he'd been bowled over by the door during my aggressive entry. I didn't move an inch, my snub nose pistol still staring down the barrel of Boone's shotgun.

"Put them down, sir," said Thalburg, shouldering what appeared to be a submachine gun. I didn't even want to consider the mess that would make if he opened fire, so very slowly I placed the pistol and baton on the ground in front of me and nudged them across the floor with my foot. Thalburg rose and maintaining control of his shotgun with one hand swept the weapons away with his feet. Then he grabbed me by the collar and threw me roughly into the chair he'd just vacated.

"Where's your wand?" demanded Diggory, stepping forward. I leant forward to expose the holster on my back and Diggory drew it gingerly. There was a certain faux-pas in handling another wizard's wand outside of combat. "You got another? Ankle holster?" he asked gruffly and I shook my head. He seemed satisfied with that and turned his back on me to lock the door.

"How did you find me so quickly?" I asked, out of curiosity more than anything. I didn't see how I was going to get out of this one. Halverson gave me a long calculating look before replying.

"Krum told us you'd be here," he said and I nodded in understanding. Krum had truly played his cards well. It was strange, but in the face of almost certain death, or in the case that they turned me over to the Gestapo, torture, insanity and then death, I was exceptionally calm. I suppose it was the fact that I had no options, but something about the situation seemed to cool all of the fears that I'd had just moments ago.

"And how much is he paying you to betray the Empire? Thirteen sickles perhaps?" I asked a slight grin on my face as I baited them. It was not anger I saw in their expressions however, but rather a blank bafflement. "What, you can't possibly think that what you're doing isn't traitorous?"

"It is not we who are the traitors, Leutnant," said Halverson, after a long pause and I snorted.

"Krum has played you, if that's what you think," I said, my lips curving into a smile, despite myself.

"You betrayed our mission to the Russians, thanks to you they were waiting for us, we were ambushed and slaughtered! You murdered Ledorf!" shouted Cedric, his eyes blazing angrily, the barrel of his

gun now pointed at my face. His finger squeezed the trigger slightly and he said coldly "I think we should just shoot this piece of shit right now guys." I stared at the gun for a moment, weighing my options before continuing in a cool collected voice, looking Diggory straight in the eyes.

"Just think for a moment Cedric, two weeks ago we were all in other units, nobody had any idea we'd all be placed together, nobody except Krum. Who knew we were going to try and assassinate Fadei Chernenko but Krum?" I paused for a moment and took in the expressions of the men around me; Krum certainly hadn't told them this. "Where did you think we had gone?"

"Krum told us that he'd sent you to recon the area, when you didn't come back he said it was possible that you were hiding from patrols and we should go look for you," replied Boone, a frown on his face.

"A marksman and an officer sent to recon an attack, who was the scout of the unit, Thalburg?" I asked, feeling slightly superior and trying not to allow it to inflect my voice. The Dane's face morphed from one of grim determination to one of surprise. I nodded and looked back to Diggory, whose gun hand was wavering slightly before me. My words were certainly having an effect; he wasn't as resolute any more. "Who do you think gave me the order to murder Ledorf? Who put Ledorf and Fabrizi in the same unit? Why do you think I was sent to murder Chernenko the day before he and my father convened to talk peace? Who is more likely to feel sympathy with the Russian cause, a Bulgarian or an Englishman? These aren't coincidences; Krum has played all of us."

I took a moment to take a breath and steady myself, either they'd believe me and let me go, or I'd have to give one last gallant attempt at defending myself before I was emphatically murdered by three very angry elite commandos. Cedric stared at me for a long time and then nodded, swallowed and lowered the gun.

We emptied my previously hidden apartment of everything useful, Krum had done an incredible job researching me and so it was now useless as a hiding place. I noted the fresh sheets and the rose petals spread across the double bed with a strange sadness in my chest, the idea that Fleur had spent some of those early morning hours preparing the following night for us made me feel heartsick. After a brief glance under the covers to ensure there wasn't anything

hidden there, I left the petals on the bed and the candles still burning, somehow it would have to suffice as my tribute to her until I was no longer a wanted man.

Placed upon the desk was a map and schedule; Fleur had planned my trip to Libya, arranging my travel by untraceable methods, in case I was still on the run. I couldn't even remember telling her about my need to get there, but it touched me anyway. I took them with me; I had no idea if my plan to clear my name would get me anywhere so I might still need to run afterwards.

We retrieved the last of my belongings and the three of them departed downstairs, saying they'd already got transportation organized for me. I waited around a moment, wanting to write a small note to Fleur, though I wasn't sure why. I knew that if she was still alive, she'd have found some way of contacting me by now, or she'd have come here by now. In the end, it consisted of just two lines.

Have moved on, don't attempt to follow or contact, thank you for everything.

All my love.

I kept it as brief and vague as possible, allowing Fleur plausible deniability, should she ever receive it or if it were intercepted. I hoped that such a precaution was necessary. I shut the door behind me with a sigh and moved down the stairs, carefully avoiding the candles as I descended. Somehow I felt like I was walking away from a huge part of my life, as though leaving would close the door on everything that Fleur and I had shared.

I stepped out into the courtyard and looked around, the other three stood, each holding a rucksack, their weapons and other items filched from my apartment were hidden inside, in an attempt not to attract attention. Diggory handed me my own bag, which I shouldered, my wand which I re-holstered and then he held out a thin silver chain.

"Portkey," he said and we all held onto it by a finger. Three seconds later we were dragged away the world around us becoming a blur as it whizzed past and the only thing in my mind was 'What on earth must Luc think of all this?'.

We arrived in what appeared to be a warehouse; all corrugated iron, wooden crates and poor illumination. Immediately I noticed another figure, stood slightly in the shadows and I instinctively had my wand in my hand two seconds later, however a warm, familiar voice addressed me and I instantly relaxed.

"Whoa, calm down there Harry," said Paddy gently, stepping forward out of the shadow. I was dismayed to find that he'd lost an ear and gained a huge scar down one temple. He was smiling easily though and his presence comforted me. "I assume, as you're not hog-tied and you've got your wand to hand that I was correct in assuming your innocence?"

"I'm glad to hear someone had faith in me," I laughed and looked around. "Where are we?"

"Never you mind," said Diggory in a warning tone and pointed to a spindly looking steel chair. "Sit," he ordered and beckoned the others away. I decided there was little point in provoking them so I did as I was bade, dropping my bag to the side of the chair and replacing my wand in my back holster at the same time.

I half-heartedly attempted to listen in whilst they whispered to each other about me, but I felt slightly too exhausted at this point to really care. I'd had only a few hours sleep at Fleur's in perhaps 48 hours and although I was conditioned to remain awake for much longer periods of time, I'd also been shot, stabbed and blown up during the course of the last two days, which does tend to take a little out of you.

I couldn't determine at what point I fell asleep, but the next thing I was aware of was being shook awake by Paddy, my back aching in protest at having been confined to such a position. Paddy grinned down at me and crouched down next to me and I took the proffered cup of coffee off him.

"Bet you're regretting your little kip now, Leutnant," he said with a wry expression on his face.

"Fuck me," I said and stretched the tightness out of my back.

"Ah, we'll have none of that now, sir," replied Paddy in mock contrite and clapped me on the back before rising and walking away. "Drink your coffee, Leutnant," he called back.

Resigned to being in considerable discomfort for some time, I took a big gulp of the murky brown liquid that Paddy called coffee and grimaced in distaste.

I followed him between stacks of boxes and ended up in a small pre-fabricated office that someone appeared to have just stuck in the middle of the warehouse. It couldn't have look more out of place if someone had painted it lime green.

Inside Diggory, Boone and Thalburg were sat, on chairs similar to the one I'd just napped on, around a large table of similar appearance. They all wore identically grave expressions. Paddy and I joined them at the table and I gazed around.

"So let's say we believe you, Potter," said Cedric, appearing to have forgone the formalities at last. "Where do we go from here?"

"I want to take Krum, alive, and use him to clear me and my father's names. I want to get to the bottom of this, I want to know why this all happened," I replied, my expression intentionally grim, the others around the table bristled.

"Why don't we just take this information to the Gestapo?" asked Thalburg, looking around for support, Boone nodded in agreement. "Or better still, Lord Riddle, he'll know what to do."

This suddenly reminded me of my expected appearance in Libya to meet Riddle but I shook my head. "Riddle already knows," I said. "Or at least he knows of some of it, he was the one who got me out of Riga. Which either means there's not enough evidence to move on Krum, or he's waiting for Krum to incriminate who ever he's working for."

"Or it means that this comes from those more powerful than Riddle," remarked Paddy, trying to sound nonchalant and failing. I swallowed, not having considered this.

"Who actually has more political clout than Riddle?" asked Boone, suddenly looking terrified.

"The Emperor, of course," I said, thinking hard. "Perhaps a few of the Lord's Circle working together might be enough to dissuade Riddle from asking too many questions."

"And you want to go up against one of those two possibilities?" asked Cedric, looking at me as though I'd grown an extra head.

"I do," I replied succinctly and then realizing he expected more of an answer, I shrugged and continued. "Perhaps I'll get lucky, perhaps they won't be expecting a junior officer to strike back against them, especially since they think they've got me on the run."

Paddy drained his coffee cup, as though looking for some Dutch courage, indeed, there did seem to be a fairly strong smell of liquor stemming from somewhere in the room. "Well, if they won't be expecting a Leutnant to challenge them, they're certainly not going to be expecting a grunt. I'm in."

"And me," agreed Cedric, his expression not lightening in the slightest. "I'd be embarrassed to call myself English if I didn't stand by you."

"Well if you're going to bring race into it," said Thalburg casually. "I'm a Viking by blood and we never back down from a fight."

Thalburg snorted and slammed his fist down on the table. "Well anything the Dane can do, I can do better. I'm in too."

I looked around the table at the four serious faces staring back at me and gave a half smile.

"Krum attacked me through my family, the people I care about. I suggest we do the same to him."

"But who knows who Krum cares about?" asked Boone and I smiled in response, a plan already stretching out before me.

"I know at least one person," I replied, very glad to have some comrades at my back again. Riddle's meeting would have to wait, this was personal. "There's a Skitterleap attendant that I met with Krum, they seemed very close."

"Okay, that simplifies things," said Cedric. "Where is this woman?"

"Leipzig," I replied, knowing the reaction I was going to get. Boone spat a mouthful of coffee onto the table. "Look, I know that the Dementors are going to make things a little tricky for us-"

"A little tricky?" interrupted Diggory, his eyes bulging slightly.

"But," I continued, with a glare. "My plan is foolproof; we'll not get within twenty feet of a Dementor."

"That's what you say," remarked Boone, looking glum.

"Well lets at least hear him out, what's the plan Leutnant?" said Paddy, diplomatically.

"Well, things become exceedingly simple when you consider she's working in the most vulnerable part of Leipzig; the Skitterleap chamber. We simply storm the closest chamber, lock it down, get a Skitterdisc to the Leipzig terminal, grab her and take a Skitterdisc back. Job done."

I sat back in my chair, a smug look on my face and surveyed the people around me. Boone and Thalburg seemed to be giving it a lot of thought, Diggory nodded once and continued frowning and Paddy clapped his hands together enthusiastically.

"Right, well that's that then, lets steal this bitch," he declared happily. "Who wants to get drunk?"

Everyone declined immediately and we left Paddy to get on with it. As we left the little office, I turned to Cedric. "When and where were you supposed to meet Krum after apprehending me?"

"Prague, day after next."

"Means we'll have to go after a Skitterleap Chamber tomorrow. Where are we, where is the nearest one?"

"We're a little out of Toulon; we'd probably have to take the one in Madrid."

"Toulon? Oh Diggory I could kiss you, you've just solved so many problems. We don't even have to take a Skitterleap chamber; all we've got to do is find someone who can enchant Skitterdiscs."

"Why's that?"

"I know an abandoned Skitterchamber in the area. Hasn't been used in decades."

"Really? Now that's a stroke of luck. I'll send Thalburg off to do some research, see if he can't find us an enchanter to kidnap."

I nodded and followed him out of the warehouse, it was blisteringly hot outside and I found myself having to cover my eyes to avoid them bleaching. Diggory summed up my own feelings by turning to me and saying, "You'd never guess its winter, would you?"

"No," I replied and now my eyes had adjusted to the light I stared out at the vineyards and olive orchards that swept out as far as I could see. "I love this part of Europe more than any other."

"More than England?"

"I said Europe, Diggory."

As it turned out, my night's sleep was not any more comfortable than my nap in the chair was, Diggory set me up a camp bed that was three inches shorter than I was and incessantly itchy, but I'd slept on worse and I still managed to feel refreshed when I woke up.

We breakfasted on stale, burnt toast, but I barely registered that I was even eating, for some reason I was excitable all morning and anxious to be doing something, a feeling I didn't even get before the attack on Aluksne.

When Thalburg returned I barely let him through the door before I began to interrogate him, my barked questions making him raise an eyebrow, but he refused to answer any questions until he'd eaten and everyone was assembled, so I went off to find Diggory who'd left earlier in the morning with the intention of finding something more palatable to eat than stale French stick.

I found him in a nearby vineyard, helping himself to as many grapes as he was collecting.

"Taste fucking awful these," he announced as I approached.

"Stop eating them then. They're not grown to be eaten."

"Wine grapes? Well at least they're not German."

I laughed and nodded in agreement, it was common knowledge amongst the French and English soldiers stationed in Germany that their wine tasted like vinegar. I sometimes wondered if it was wine they held in reservation of our patronage.

We returned to the warehouse with armfuls of olives and grapes. Inside the office we found Thalburg with his feet up, eyes closed. We dropped the food before him and sat down in our seats expectantly.

After a moment, Thalburg dropped his feet to the floor, opened his eyes and picked up an olive. He flicked it into his mouth and fixed us with a stony stare. "Well, Leutnant, the good news is that I've found you an enchanter."

"And the bad news?" asked Diggory.

"He's in Milan, which means we're going to have to be snappy if we're going to pull this off in time," replied Thalburg, flicking another olive into his mouth.

Diggory and I retraced my steps to the hidden Skitterchamber use in the vineyard whilst Paddy, Thalburg and Boone portkeyed to Milan in search of our enchanter.

Luckily Diggory knew a little bit about tracking and was able to distinguish at least a few of my footprints from the dust because otherwise it would have been almost impossible to find the invisible door amongst all these vines.

A quick flick of his wand sent trails of golden smoke across the ground, forming into unmistakable footsteps upon the ground. We followed them through the rows until they disappeared into thin air.

Diggory looked at the ground puzzled and then back to me.

"This is the Skitterchamber?"

I smirked slightly and raised my wand. Diggory made a move to stop me and made an incoherent noise but it was too late, the curse struck the invisible iron door with a ringing noise that echoed through the entire vineyard. Diggory gaped in surprise.

I pulled the door open, there was a similar shower of rust that had poured from it the first time I opened the door. Diggory stepped inside and looked around and I followed him.

"Think I'm okay to give us some illumination?" I asked, unable to prevent the scathing tone from creeping into my voice.

"Can't see it doing much harm now," admitted Diggory after a moment and a couple of complex movements of my wand sent a hundred balls of blue light floating into the air where they attached themselves to the ceiling, dousing the room in an eerie cyan glow.

Diggory walked around the room, giving it a once over with his wand, cleaning up the inches of dust that accumulate once a magically powerful location falls into disuse.

With the room cleaned up, it was now just a matter of waiting for the others to return with the enchanter. Diggory and I left the equipment we'd brought with us in a corner and returned to the road where we'd arranged to meet the others and lead them to the chamber.

We sat on the wall and waited for a long time, the sun glaring down on us and as the protection spells I'd cast on myself began to fail, burning my skin. Just as it was becoming so late in the day that I was sure that we weren't going to get enough time to pull off the plan, our three comrades appeared in the road, a forth, smaller and older man was held in a headlock by Paddy.

"Much trouble?" I called out from the top of the wall, they spun to face me, wands drawn and I raised my hands in mock surrender. Paddy lowered his wand and shook his head.

"None at all, don't think anyone even noticed we were there."

"Well we'd better hurry or we're going to miss Krum's bird." said Diggory and dropped over the other side of the wall. Paddy heaved the enchanter up toward me, the diminutive wizard kicking and fighting the entire way. I pushed him carelessly to the dust below as way of vengeance. Paddy gave me a reproachful look

We then dragged him through the vineyard and we were just about to turn into the correct row when all hell broke loose.

Two crimson spells zipped out of the surrounding foliage, one missing me by inches and the other crashing powerfully into Boone's face, dropping him where he stood. I realized instantly that we'd been baited into a trap and we were surrounded, the rows of vines and the darkness working against us. Our single file formation formed a protective circle around the fallen Norwegian and Paddy pushed the enchanter into the centre of the formation where he fell in the dirt.

We raised our shields as the next barrage of curses came inward and then, seeing the volley deflected we sprung forward into a counter attack. It was a bitter mistake; it was exactly what they'd expected us to do. A second volley of curses followed immediately from the vines around us, disguising the positions of our attackers. These curses were far more lethal than the stunners that they'd been using previously and it was only quick reactions that saved our lives.

I blocked two curses heading in my direction and winced as a third cut through my shirt and into my side. Before me, three or four masked and robed wizards burst through the rows of vines. I intercepted them, killing one instantly with a well timed killing curse that blew him from his feet and back through the vines. A second whipped a cutting curse toward my neck, allowing me to spin low under the curse and his arm, delivering the same Foe Hammer I'd seen Riddle use, to the face of the man behind him.

I rounded on my final opponent just as he raised his wand in an over armed curse I didn't recognise. I brought both of my own arms up, crossing them at the wrist and caught his wand arm at the elbow, twisting it down to the ground.

His Fastening Fire curse erupted from the tip of his wand and bounced off the ground, setting some of the vines alight. I pushed my left hand through his guard and buried the tips of my fingers into his unprotected throat, making him fall to his knees choking. I dispatched him with a killing curse and fell back into my position in the formation.

Boone seemed to have regained his feet and was helping Thalburg fight a further four wizards, but was clutching his throat with one hand, which was gushing with blood. The pale look in his face told me he wouldn't last much longer.

Another two wizards appeared out of the vines toward me and I shook the sweat out of my eyes. Things were looking very bad indeed. The wizard on my left opened with a whipping motion that hurled a sizzling bolt of lightning at me, I stepped toward it, conjuring a cloud of dust and erecting an Ancile Shield immediately behind it.

The shield caught the spell and maintained it, allowing me to flick it back at the caster; the dust was merely a diversionary tactic. I fell to my knees to avoid the second curse aimed at me and turned it into a combat roll that took me closer to my opponents.

I rose to one knee and stuck out at the nearest enemy with my baton sword; it caught him just beneath the knee and severed through muscle and tendon. The leg gave way beneath him and he fell screaming to the floor. I brought the sword around from the strike and then up and over my head where it took the brunt of a curse from the remaining wizard and was knocked out of my hand, cutting my cheek as it spun away from me.

I rose with a double handed block that deflected a banishing curse away from my face and followed up with a nameless downswung curse that tore through his hasty shield and sent him and his right arm in different directions. It took two further curses to put both wizards down for good and spending a moment to retrieve my sword, I returned to my comrades in time to watch Boone die.

I watched as the already flagging Norwegian, soaked in his own blood, leapt Thalburg's collapsed form, a curse blazing from his wand and fell straight into a killing curse. He sprawled to the ground, rolling once in the dirt and was completely still.

Diggory and I reached the Norwegian at the same time, our dual curses striking the remaining wizard with our own curses and killing him where he stood. We turned to see Paddy dragging the enchanter away from several more advancing wizards, his wand outstretched in the other hand, holding up a remarkably solid shield. Diggory moved to swarm forward but I held out an arm to restrain him.

"Get Thalburg inside the chamber!" I roared over the commotion of burning vines and spell fire. Diggory nodded and began to drag the Dane in the direction of the chamber whilst I darted forward to counter attack the remaining wizards. As I attacked my wand hand took a life of its own, striking out and shielding equally in a retina scorching display of wandlight and spellfire.

I knew I couldn't keep up this volume of curses for long and that sooner or later I'd make a mistake so I advanced, my wand still spitting curses until I was close enough to strike out with my sword and then did something that was very stupid.

With a roar, I leapt forward, striking out at my nearest foes with both my sword and my wand. I felt my sword dig into a body and so I gave it a hard push and released it, allowing it to fall with the wizard I'd just killed. My curse struck a shield, so I dropped and turned, my wand whipping out and around me.

I've always seemed to have an affinity for manipulating fire and as I twisted my wand, the fire that had spread across the vineyard whipped into the air and plunged through the back of one of my foes, immolating him instantly. I spun the fire around me in a circle, scattering the wizards I'd just charged.

The remaining wizards paused a moment, looking around the stunningly illuminated field at the devastation. They'd lost at least a score of wizards to our one. As one, they came to the same conclusion I'd made, that we were a better trained and magically superior force, with less than a split second's hesitation; they broke rank and fled into the vines.

I waited for a moment and then allowed the fire around me to wane and die; I collapsed heavily into the dirt, perhaps five paces from Boone's corpse and stared into his dead eyes for a long moment before crawling over and closing his eyes.

I returned to the Skitterchamber and Diggory threw the door open for me. I stumbled inside and leant heavily against the door, closing it solidly behind me. After a couple of moments, I turned and with the tip of my wand, traced the edge of the door, melting the metal of the door to the metal of the doorframe and sealing it shut.

I walked over to the enchanter who sat against the far wall, looking absolutely terrified. I lifted my wand.

"You're going to produce two Skitterdiscs for every person in this room."

"Going where?" he asked shakily.

"One to Paris. One to Prague. Then you're going to make a final portkey to Leipzig. Understand me?"

He nodded his acknowledgement and I pointed to a workstation.

"Get to it then."

I turned back to the other three, Paddy was trying to dispel whatever curse had been used on Thalburg and Diggory was looking on with a weary expression. I cleared my throat.

"We can't use this as a base of operations as we'd planned. They'll attack again soon. So what we're going to do is capture the chamber in Paris for a while, lock it down and work from there. Diggory, think you could do a slightly better job of protecting the door?"

He nodded and moved over to it, tossing spell after spell against the door, I hoped it would be enough to keep a second attack busy whilst we escaped. Paddy brought Thalburg around at almost exactly the same moment that Diggory decided he'd put enough enchantments on the door.

I retrieved some bottles of water from our bags of equipment and tossed one to Paddy who in turn handed it to Thalburg, I opened one myself and after drinking half of it, used the rest to wash the soot and sweat from my hands and face.

We waited for fifteen minutes, partly for the Enchanter to finish the discs and partly for a counter attack that never came. The enchanter came over, still looking terrified and placed three stacked trays before me. Each of the trays had Skitterdiscs on it, each labelled with their destination. I aimed my wand casually at him and said "You're going where ever we're going. I hope you've done them correctly.

He stammered assurances but his expression told me that he'd not tried to play us. I lowered my wand.

"Ready to go?" I asked and received half-hearted nods in return. I guessed it was the best I was going to get at this stage.

I handed out the Paris discs and pushed the ones marked Prague into a bag that I handed to Paddy. I saved one of each for myself as well as the one heading to Leipzig. The enchanter showed us how to active them and I took a moment for a last minute word to Diggory.

"If I'm not in Paris in half an hour, kill the enchanter and fuck off," I warned and he nodded. The enchanter clearly overheard, because all the colour paled from his face.

I stepped onto the grille and activated my Skitterdisc to Leipzig.

I felt far more confident passing through the void this time, feeling content to ignore the angry creatures that chased me and instead focus on the task before me.

I felt the Skitterleap begin to eject me from its grasp and I focused on finding my balance. I stepped forward as I rematerialized, falling perfectly into step. I found myself in the same Skitterchamber I'd left Leipzig from.

"For God's sake!" came a voice from the other side of the room, I looked over and saw the same bushy-haired operator crossing the room toward me. "You're not supposed to be here for another-" She stopped as she recognised me and her mouth fell open slightly. "Leutnant Potter?" she asked in confusion.

A second later I had my wand in my hand, a stunning spell soaring toward her. She made a panicked dodge, which resulted in her

tripping over her own feet and crashing to the ground, her wand flying out of her hand and rolling away.

"H-h-hold on!" she stammered reaching for her wand; I stepped over and put my foot down on her wrist. She screamed in pain and I stunned her from point blank range.

I'd just finished transfiguring her into a fountain pen when a soldier burst through the door, a rifle clutched in his hands.

"Oi!" he cried, seeing me, "You're not supposed to be here!"

I stared at his gun warily, the last thing I wanted to do was be shot. Again. At the same time I saw him move to aim at me; I lashed out with a killing curse and stepped to one side. He was so pre-occupied with avoiding my curse that he didn't even bother to return fire, I stunned him too.

I lifted up the pen-girl and placed her in my pocket. I took hold of the Paris portkey and stepped back onto the grille, the kidnapping had gone so much better than I had feared to hope.

I had to admit that I was slightly curious the effects of the Skitterleap on a transfigured passenger. It was well enough known that two people couldn't take the same Skitterdisc; the will was too divided and it generally ended with both people trying to occupy the same space at the same time. As an intimate transfigured object though, the girl shouldn't have any will at all and so I should be safe enough transporting her.

Either way I was about to be right or dead.

The journey itself was just like all of the other leaps that I'd taken before and I stepped out of the other end as casually as I had done in Leipzig.

A curse immediately struck me in the left arm, turning it into a useless writhing bloated mass of flesh. I ducked a second curse and tried to get a grasp of the situation.

I'd found myself at the centre of a huge circular room with a high dome ceiling, the circular grille I stood on was surrounded by high columns that partially enclosed it. The rest of the room was filled

with marble seats that circled around the chamber and stepped away, like those of a sporting arena.

It appeared that Paddy, Diggory and Thalburg were fighting a detachment of the Parisian guard, gun and spell fire mixed intermittently. They were pinned down behind what appeared to be a large stone speaker's podium half way up the seating on one side of the room.

I stepped into the cover of a column as another bullet ricochet off the ground perilously close to me. A curse crashed noisily against my cover, throwing a cloud of dust into the air around me.

I stepped out as one of the Parisian guard rushed forward to attack my position, his bayonet gleaming as curses flew over head. I struck him in the chest with a Foe Hammer that lifted him from the ground; his momentum took him a few more meters forward before he collapsed heavily to the ground.

I stepped back into cover and looked back up toward the speaker's podium and held my remaining Skitterdisc in the air, I hoped they understood the meaning and activated it.

The now familiar mist roared past my ears once more, but there were no sign of the ethereal creatures that normally pursued me. I was puzzled for a moment by this until a sharp pain erupted at the base of my spine.

I'd once been held under the cruciatus curse for ten seconds by a slightly unhinged drill instructor but it was nothing to the pain that now flooded through my body. For a few moments I was conscious of nothing other than incredible pain and then as it became more tolerable I realised why, my control over the Skitterleap had begun to fade, I could feel the strain of my joints as my body attempted to be in both Paris and Prague and every location in between.

Agonisingly slowly, I felt the very cells of my body separate and watched as my entire body became a blur, like coloured smoke was clinging to my skin. As the very forces that held my body together began to deteriorate, the pain ebbed away; my nerves were no longer able to transmit the messages to my brain. My brain itself felt sluggish and useless. Slowly my lungs began to stop functioning and my entire body became inert.

Then suddenly, as though none of it had ever happened, I was thrown to a beautifully hard floor where I collapsed and began to greedily suck in lungful of cold, delicious air. I lay my head on the cold marble floor, never before so happy to be laying on something so uncomfortable.

The sounds of Paddy, Thalburg and Diggory arriving around me made me sit up. They all stared at me with wide, staring eyes. I stared back.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?" I asked. Thalburg choked and Diggory shook his head in amazement.

"You just disappeared from the Paris Skitterchamber," said Paddy, finally, still staring at me as if I were the second coming of Merlin. "And then bits of you reappeared."

"Bits of me?" I asked, astounded.

"Like a blur that resembled you. As though you were a coloured ghost. We all assumed-"

I nodded, rose and looked myself over. Everything seemed to be where it belonged. I took the pen-girl out of my pocket and placed her upon the floor. A quick flick of my wand reverted her to her regular form. She sat up and glared at me.

"You're an idiot!" she announced, her eyes glaring. "Did you even stop for a moment to consider the implications of combining an inanimate human transfiguration with a multiple location, static transportation of multiple coherent sentences?"

"Yes," I replied curtly, to shut her up. She floundered for a moment and I took the liberty of silencing her. She threw a wordless tantrum on the floor and I shook my head in disgust. "Paddy, would you do the honours?"

The Irish wizard stepped forward and raised his wand.

"Imperio!" he incanted and a glassy expression faded across her face. I looked around for a moment and a thought struck me, I turned to Diggory.

"Where's the enchanter?"

"Dead," replied Diggory and shrugged. "When we took the Parisian Skitterleap there was a guard in the room, he took a shot at us that killed the enchanter and brought an entire platoon running."

We made a brief check of our equipment. A great deal of it had been lost in the confusion of Paris, but there was enough for the four of us to work with. I sombrely adopted Boone's pump action shotgun and swung it over my back, as well as two side arms. I hoped I'd not have to use them, the past few days had certainly not endeared me any more to muggle weaponry.

We made our way cautiously out of the building, but didn't encounter anyone on the way out. We made our way through the back streets of Prague; trying to avoid places we felt there'd be a large law enforcement presence.

Krum had arranged to meet Diggory and the others in the Vrtbovka Zahrada; something I'd only ever heard of and had never visited. It was early morning by the time we reached the lesser district of Prague, but Cedric assured me they were expected early, we decided to act as soon as possible to reduce the chance of Krum hearing about our exploits.

We entered the garden via a non-descript wooden gate that I'd have probably never noticed otherwise and looked out at the view before me with amazement. The garden was comprised of three terraces, which sloped away out of view and which surrounded the lower, centre area of the garden.

The garden was decorated by incredibly ornate beds of flowers, perfectly cut popular trees and some of the finest statues of figures from Greek Mythology that have ever existed.

What really caught my attention though were the scores of women, scantily clad in white habutai and draped in stoles of white silk that meandered around the garden in twos and threes. I recognised them for what they were immediately.

I clouted Thalburg on the back of the head and gave him a glare. "Put your eyes back in your head and show some respect, these are the Sisters," I snapped. He nodded meekly.

Paddy removed the curse from the girl we'd brought with us and she glared around at us angrily but wisely kept her mouth closed. Diggory indicated toward the area of garden that was hidden from view below the terraces.

"Krum will be down there," he said and I nodded. The girl spoke up finally.

"This is about Krum is it? What the hell is going on?"

"You'd be well advised to keep your mouth shut," I said harshly, but she ignored me.

"Look, you really don't want to do this, I'm not who you think I-

"I'm sure you're very nice, but I feel the same way about croissants, I'm still going to kill you if you don't shut up."

I pushed her in front of me and levelled Boone's shotgun against her back. I indicated for Diggory to circle around the centre area of the garden to the left and for Thalburg and Paddy to go right. They did it without question.

I marched the girl forward to the railing of the first terrace, we attracted some attention from the Sisters around us, but they did nothing other than point, stare and whisper.

As we reached the railing, I could see Krum lying at the centre of the garden, several of the Sisters sat around him and they appeared to be deep in conversation. I pushed the girl to her knees and aimed the shotgun in the air.

I fired it once, to attract Krum's attention and then put it to the back of Hermione's head. The Sisters around us fled in terror, their shrieks renting the morning air. The shot had the desired effect; Krum leapt to his feet and looked straight at us, his eyes wide with surprise. His wand found its way to his hand but I pumped the shotgun and steadied it.

"Good morning sunshine," I said loudly, a manic smile on my face.

"Hermione?" he asked curiously.

"So that's her name," I said. "I've been trying to remember it. Put the wand down Krum or I blow Hermione's pretty little brains out."

"You won't kill her," said Krum placidly. I raised an eyebrow.

"I killed Ledorf."

"So you did," replied Krum and then raised his wand and aimed a killing curse, not at me but at the witch I held in front of me, I twisted away in order to shield her from it and pulled her to the ground. She screamed blue murder at me as I fell on top of her. I dragged her clear of the garden below and looked at her.

"You must be a shit girlfriend," I remarked off-handedly. She glowered at me.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, I'm not his girlfriend, I'm a spy."

I looked at her for a moment and then laughed derisively.

"You're not a spy, you're a fucking idiot," I said and leapt forward again to fight Krum.

The Bulgarian wizard had fled the scene, running up to the second level of terrace behind him. I knew there wasn't an exit on that side of the garden, but if I knew Krum and by this point I was pretty sure I didn't, he'd head for the back wall and leap over it, dragging the fight to the castle steps before using superior numbers to defeat me.

I gave chase, taking the shortest possible route open to me, dropping down to the lower terrace and then leaping to one of the statues of the lower garden. Using the heads of these great Grecian deities as stepping stones I was able to cross the lower garden in a fraction of the time it would have taken me otherwise.

I'd almost caught up with Krum by the time he'd reached the top of the terrace wall. I slowed slightly, to shoulder the shotgun and fired at him. A cloud of dust and fragments of stone fell from the wall six

inches to the left of him. A second shot caught the top of the wall on his right as he levered himself over the top.

With a sigh I threw the gun to one side and leapt up the wall after him. I climbed it much quicker than he did, having fewer years under my belt since the rigorous academy training course and I clambered to my feet just in time to see Paddy and Thalburg leap forward, wands outstretched in an attempt to slow him.

Krum barely broke step, taking Paddy to the floor with a well-aimed blow from his forearm and Thalburg with a banishing curse which blew the Dane into the marble wall behind him.

It did however give me just long enough to catch up with him.

I tackled Krum with my shoulder, my feet leaving the ground for a moment before I struck and we both crashed to the ground. I drew my wand at the same time he cursed me at point blank range and I deflected it with practiced ease. We rose and I stepped forward to intercept him with a curse that he blocked.

Using my momentum against me, he seized my arm and pulled sharply, reeling me past him and straight into the stone railing that prevented people from falling over the edge of the terrace. My wand clattered from my hand and fell over the edge.

I tried to draw a pistol, but Krum was on me before I could get a shot away, twisting my arm down and away. We both ducked as Thalburg's curse flew over head and Krum twisted the gun in his direction and shot him twice.

The Dane floundered for a moment and then collapsed.

With an incredible flash of anger I shoved backward hard against the weight of Krum on my back, twisting as I pushed and carrying both of us over the railing and crashing to the terrace below. We both spent a few seconds gathering our bearings by the end of which Diggory was upon Krum. The two of them exchanged curses with a ferocity that scared me for a moment.

Slowly, feeling every wound I'd suffered in the last few days, I picked myself up. Unable to locate either my wand or gun, I lumbered in the direction of the two duellers. Krum flicked around, his wand flashing

out like a sabre and forcing Diggory to take a step backwards, the Bulgarian stepped forward and struck him in the face with a curse that looked like an explosion of purple stars, Diggory collapsed to the ground.

Krum turned to face me and I struck him with a double handed blow to the face which I could have sworn lifted him off his feet. He fell into a roll and came face to face with Paddy who knocked him onto the flat of his back with a curse that sounded like a canon. Paddy cursed him again, forcing the Bulgarian to roll away from the Irishman, his face now obscured by blood.

As he rose, he leapt into the offensive against Paddy, his wand slashing out three times, seeking a gap in the defences of his opponent, but Paddy turned him away each time, finally ending up close enough to deliver a solid head butt to the Hauptmann's face.

I saw Krum's plan a split second before he pulled it off. I opened my mouth to yell a warning as I watched Krum shield his curse behind his falling body but it became nothing but a strangled cry. Paddy turned to look at me at just the right time. The curse that otherwise would have immolated him merely caught him across the right leg and arm. He fell to the floor, trying to roll the fire off his body.

I charged forward again, completely weaponless at the rising Krum. He turned a moment before I threw my entire body weight into his chest, knocking both of us to the floor and snapping his wand underneath our combined weights. I raised my hand to hit him in the face, but he lashed out with his foot, forcing me away.

I landed on Diggory's wand and quickly scooped it up. Krum seized me from behind and I pushed myself upward quickly, catching him under the jaw with my head and knocking him backward. I rose and turned, trying to grasp the wand in a manner with which I could actually fight with it. I saw Krum with my side arm at the last possible moment and struck out with my elbow, striking him firmly in the face.

He fell backward against the railings and tried to steady the weapon, I threw myself against him and we both crashed through the masonry and down to the inner garden below. Krum landed a few feet away from me and rose much faster than I could manage. He raised the gun and fired the remaining ten shots in the magazine point blank at me.

Each bullet hit my shield like a thunderclap and Krum could do nothing but stare in shock. I'd raised my wand at the same time he'd levelled the gun and my shield had formed as he pulled the trigger. The feat bordered on the impossible, but then nobody ever accused me of being slow with a wand.

We stared at each other, unable to move for a moment due to equal shock. Then Krum broke the moment and I blew him across the garden, the curse dropping him against a stone bench so hard that he snapped the marble in two.

I staggered to my feet again, my body aching and exhausted but my blood high with the thrill of victory. I limped over and held him at wand point; blood was seeping into my eyes from a scalp wound I'd suffered at some point during the fight. I wiped it away and stared down at Krum, who appeared to be unconscious.

"Enervate," I incanted and his eyes snapped open. "Who are you working for?" I demanded, he stared listlessly back at me for a while before his mouth broke into a smile. I tried a different question.

"You warned the Russians about Chernenko's assassination?"

"Yes. But you were supposed to kill him."

"Why?"

"Because it was demanded of me."

"And you set me up to make sure even if we did fail that he would blame my father?"

"Yes."

"And you made sure once you knew I'd survived that people thought I was the spy?"

"Yes."

"Who ordered you to?"

"You've no idea who you're playing with Potter."

"Just fucking tell me who else is in on it."

"You're out of your league."

"Tell me what I want to fucking know, you coward!"

I pointed my wand in his face and stared into his eyes. Krum laughed in my face.

"It is better to be a live coward than a dead hero."

I raised the wand in my hand and smiled back, my eyes hard.

"Yeah and it's better to be a dead hero than a dead coward."

His face paled for a second.

"Wait," he said, his eyes wide, but I was beyond words and reason, beyond contempt for the wreck of a man before me.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The girl I'd kidnapped before arrived a minute later. I was kneeling over Krum's corpse. I remember looking up at her, not really comprehending who she was. Diggory later assumed that I was suffering from a concussion; I think I was just exhausted beyond reason.

She grabbed me by the shoulders and hauled me to my feet. I came with her loosely and she tried to shake some sense into me.

"You've got to come with me," she hissed, her eyes wide.

"I need my wand, Fleur," I said sleepily.

"I'm Hermione and it's in your hand," she snapped impatiently.

"This isn't mine."

She let go of me briefly and snatched the wand out of my hand.

"Accio wands!"

She held some in front of my face.

"Which one?"

I took mine and the one that looked like Thalburg's.

"Are they-?" I trailed off, unable to complete the question, she interpreted.

"The blonde one is dead; the one called Diggory took the other one to the Order's safe house in Prague."

"Okay, keep those two wands safe then," I pleaded and she nodded.

"Now, you've got to come with me, before the guard show up," she urged and I nodded and followed.

She guided me through backstreets and across deserted plazas. Up tight stairways and under low bridges and eventually shoved me through a small wooden door. I found myself in a small courtyard with no visible exit. She forced something into my hand and bade me to read it.

'The entrance to the Prague safe house is at 14 Biskupsky Dvur.'

A door appeared before me in the wall and at this point, I was too shell-shocked to even question it, so I opened the door and stepped in.

Chapter V

Grindlewald's irrevocable attack upon Warsaw had two major effects upon the history of the world. Firstly, it introduced the magical world to the muggle world and secondly, forced a hitherto inactive Albus Dumbledore to once again intervene.

Dumbledore, despite being one of the greatest wizards of modern times, had spent the last twenty years teaching at Hogwarts and his raw talent proved little match for Grindlewald's focused and refined ability. Their duel, while often cited as one of the turning points in the twentieth century, was remarkably unimpressive when compared to the likes of those seen later in the war.

The death of Albus Dumbledore, whilst having obviously large implications in the course of the war that followed, proved to be catalyst for a vast upheaval in the way magic was used. Grindlewald's casual victory over one the most highly respected sorcerer of all time enforced the opinion that raw magical talent was best utilized when kept under constant practice.

With magical and muggle governments coming together to form coalitions in this time of war, soon nations on both sides were training their own combat-orientated wizards with intense training regimes. This form of training, now called 'The Li Vecchi Technique', in honour of the wizard who first articulated it, lead to pitched duels focused on the raw ability. A notable example of these power duels would be the long-lasting and ultimately stalemated duel between Grindlewald and Lord Arlington at Flanders in 1941. A duel which, by popular account, involved so much dispensation of magical energy that the earth actually split in two around them.

This form of duelling meant that quickly there was a vast disparity between the upper echelons of duellists, such as Grindlewald, Chernenko, Li Vecchi and Lord Arlington, and those whose lack of experience often lead to a hasty death in the face of a superior enemy.

Things would not remain stalemated for much longer however, as in 1942 a sixteen year old wizard by the name of Tom Riddle left Hogwarts and was inducted into one of Grindlewald's top schools for the duelling arts. For someone so young, the ideas and techniques that Tom Riddle brought with him to Leipzig would develop magical

combat from crude slugging matches to something of depth and deadly precision.

The so-called 'Kunze Method', in honour of his tutor, was Riddle's first contribution to the duelling arts. It hypothesized that a mobile duellist need not match or best an opponent's skill, in order to best him, only outmanoeuvre and out think him. Riddle first brought his theory to the battlefield in 1943 against Lord Arlington during the Battle of the North Cape. It proved to be exceptionally effective. The majority of wizards utilising the Li Vecchi Technique were slow to adopt the superior Kunze Method and as a result, Li Vecchi himself was killed by Aiden Bones in 1944.

Despite the magical stalemates of the Second World War, the muggle war had no such issues. The wehrmacht fused muggle technology and magical enchantments far more effectively than the allied forces and also combined the muggle army with the leadership and support of wizards, giving them the ability to conquer all of mainland Europe, as well as a vast area in North Africa by late 1944.

It was in this respect that the loss of Albus Dumbledore was so keenly felt by the Allies, an incredible tactician as well as an exceptionally able wizard; Dumbledore may well have been able to turn the war in their favour. As it turned out, Grindlewald accepted an unconditional surrender from the British government in late December 1946 after the simultaneous defeats of George Prewett and Aiden Bones in 1946.

On the first of January 1947, Adolf Hitler was overthrown by a decisive and far-spanning coup and Grindlewald assumed his mantle. The wehrmacht became the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in tribute to his homeland, and all traces of the Nazi party's existence were expunged from the official record.

Grindlewald had finally conquered Europe.

I was pushed into a large wooden chair, my head spinning slightly. Someone seized me by the face, pushed a wand against my forehead and muttered a few words. I felt the warm blood on my scalp slip away. A second word cleared my vision slightly and I became more aware of what was going on around me but I was still horribly dazed. I heard a terse sigh and a few moments later I found myself drenched by freezing water. It alleviated the worst of the

symptoms, the chill forcing me to take a deep gasping breath.

I wiped the water away. From the amount of blood that ran down my face, I knew they'd not sealed the wound. A third tap from the wand took care of that for me. After blinking water from my eyes, I looked up into the face of Igor Karkaroff. I recognised him from my days at Belton where he was a third rate duelling instructor, an average wizard and extremely bad tempered. I turned my head aside as he aimed a second jet of water at my face.

"Fuck off," I snapped and tried to rise. Thick ropes had wound around my arms at some point and I found myself tied to the back of the chair. A third, more powerful jet of water hit me in the face, so cold I could see water vapour condense in the air. Karkaroff slapped me.

"Watch your tongue, Leutnant," he warned and turned his back on me. I spat on the floor and twisted against the ropes that bound me; it was certainly not Karkaroff who'd conjured them as they were very strong. I turned my head and saw a second pale, blonde haired man in the corner. I didn't recognise this one and he was about my age, but he regarded me with a coldness that rivalled that of the jet of water.

"Hello there," I said with an exaggerated smile. He sniffed contemptuously. I realised that he was too refined to get a rise out of, so I turned back to Karkaroff. "Have you gone and got yourself a catamite, Igor?"

For some reason it was my deliberate lack of respect, calling him by his given name, rather than the questioning of his sexuality that prompted the second blow. I laughed at him as he raised his hand again but the other man stepped forward, speaking in a drawling tone.

"I wouldn't hit him again, Karkaroff," he said. "You might have to answer to our spy."

The way he spat the word spy made my skin crawl; it was obscenely offensive, he spoke it as though it were shit in his mouth. I turned back to face him.

"Worse still, you might have to answer to me."

He just smirked at me and stepped forward, as though to take issue with my challenge. He paused for a second at the hard look in my eye and then clearly thought better of it, so he leant against the wall once more.

"Indeed," he said lazily.

Hermione entered through the door I'd just come through and looked at me, dripping with cold water and bound to the chair in shock.

"What on earth?" she asked and with two flicks of her wand, untied and dried me. I rose unsteadily and gave myself a second for my body to regain use of my legs again, then I stepped forward and dropped Karkaroff with a punch to the jaw. He fell on his arse and I leant down.

"That's how you hit someone," I said and then followed Hermione out of the room. She seemed to be trying to prevent herself from laughing. I looked at her. "You got my wand?"

"Yes, but you won't be getting it back. You're not a member of our Order."

"Right," I said, trying to be aloof whilst contemplating the wand in her hand. She clearly noticed.

"Just relax, you're not under imminent threat of attack here, Harry," she said laughing. But I couldn't help but feel naked without it.

Hermione took me through an enormous set of wooden doors that lead into a room with nothing other than a small door that I followed her through. I had to duck to pass through the opening and I emerged out to a large grass courtyard, surrounded on all sides by a gravel path and large stone walls pitted with doors that all lead to bedrooms, similar in size to the entrance hall I'd just left. Running around the lawn, above the gravel path was a second floor balcony, supported by large pillars, once again lined with more rooms similar to mine.

"So this is the headquarters of your Order?"

"This is the Prague safe house; it's where we generally tend to house anyone who's not currently occupied with a task," she said with a shrug. "There's not an awful number of people here at the moment."

"So what is this Order?" I asked, half interested and half wondering if I should steal her wand and fight my way back out. The place looked slightly too much like a prison for me to be entirely comfortable.

"The Meritorious Order of the Scarlet Phoenix," she said proudly, as though remembering the name was an achievement, on recollection I decided it probably was.

"Sounds pretentious," I interjected and she gave me a scandalised look. "What's the point in it?"

"The Order has been around in some form or other for almost as long as Hogwarts has," she snapped. "It's a clandestine Order of witches and wizards that work toward the betterment of the world. It was founded by Godric Gryffindor."

"Impressive," I said sarcastically and looked around me. There must have been enough room to house an entire company here.

I suspected all but a few of the rooms were empty, but the abandoned monastery was an impressive safe-house, nonetheless. I stepped out into the sunlight at the centre of the lawn and stretched the weariness out of my body. The sun beat down on my back; warming my shoulders and neck where they were unprotected by the vest I was wearing.

Hermione stepped up behind me and looked upward through the open courtyard sky. It was a startling blue, as though the grey sky of the early morning had broken and given birth to something magnificent. I looked around me again and then back at Hermione.

"I assume Gryffindor isn't still running the Order these days, are you in charge?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No, I've no official rank; nobody does other than our leader."

"And who is that?" I asked. She looked worried for a moment, debating whether to divulge this apparently important information to me.

"It's your father, Harry."

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"It's quite a shock for us, you understand, that you knew nothing of this. We all assumed-" here she paused and shrugged. "We all assumed you were aware of the Order, that you were an undercover operative like me." I just stood and stared at her. "It wasn't until his capture that he told us that he considered you too close to the system to approach. He told us not to trust you; he told us that he considered you-

"-A liability." Hermione looked destroyed.

"You're a great wizard Harry," she said.

"No, I'm a fucking fantastic soldier!" I snapped, my eyes blazing. "I'm a shit wizard; I don't know how to be one. There's more to being a wizard than bandying curses around and spouting one-liners."

She looked chastened and her eyes begged me to stop. "You're a good person," she offered weakly, but I snorted my scorn.

"I want my wand back," I said. "And I want to speak with my father."

"I can't do that, Harry," she said. "I can't do either of those things."

"You just said you spoke to him, just told me he's your leader!" I snapped. "Don't lie to me."

"He relayed messages through an agent of ours in the judicial system, I've not had direct contact," she said gently.

"And my wand?"

"We can't-" she paused, as though reconsidering.

I spoke for her. "You can't trust me. Amazing, just fucking amazing."

I turned my back on her and stared across the courtyard.

"Where are Paddy and Diggory?" I demanded and she pointed to an area above and behind me. I turned to look.

"Up there," she said. "Paddy, the Irish one, was in a really bad way. We've had to cover him in burn salve. You were lucky Malfoy was hanging around."

"Thank you," I said and she nodded. "What's your plan of action concerning us?"

"We're supposed to keep you here until it all dies down, then ship you off to Riddle," she said.

"Riddle is a member?" I asked, surprised.

"Not officially, just affiliated."

"What is the goal of this Order?"

"We exist to fight evil and injustice in its largest forms."

"Strange you'd keep company such as Karkaroff, in that case."

"We exist to do what's right," she replied stonily, glaring at me for my disrespect. "If sometimes we have to do something illegal, immoral or distasteful for the greater good, then that's alright with me."

I shook my head in an emotion akin to disbelief that was inexpressible, at least in every language I knew. "So what am I supposed to do then?"

"Sleep," she said. "The Order will convene later tonight and we'll induct you then. For now however, you look exhausted, rest in one of the uninhabited rooms."

I slept soundly in one of the rooms off the courtyard, when I awoke I had a recollection of strange dreams, but they eluded my grasp like wisps of smoke. I rose to the sound of knocking at the door and still bleary-eyed stumbled over and opened it, shrugging on a pale shirt as I did so.

I opened the door to Hermione, carrying a canvas satchel, and a man I recognised; standing tall and stiff, his deep set eyes darting over me behind wire-framed glasses that were propped on his chiselled nose.

Rufus Scrimgeour stepped into the room, brushing past me and glancing around all four corners before turning back to me.

"First things first," he said and held out my wand which I took gratefully. "You've been inducted as a member of the Order. Temporarily, of course, until your father is released from prison and can make the ultimate decision."

I nodded and, at his signalled behest, sat on the bed. He took a spindly wooden chair from the corner and offered it to Hermione. She thanked him and sat and then she pulled a newspaper out of her bag. She handed it to me and I looked down at it, noting the headline with disinterest.

'Imperial hero murdered'

A large picture of Krum was blazoned across the front, looking as dour as usual. I offered it back to her with a raised eyebrow. She shook her head with a smile and flapped her hands.

"Lower down the page."

I followed her bidding and glanced down. The lower half of the front page contained two lesser headlines; the first noted the passing of Lucius Malfoy, who, after being disgraced by the revelation of his several catamites, had taken his life. The second headline made my heart jump into my mouth.

'Delacour heiress no longer critical'

I devoured the story as fast as I could, my eyes not missing a single word. Then, I read it again and laughed in relief. The article went into little detail but spoke simply of Fleur's recovery after an unknown attacker entered the Delacour mansion and cursed her.

I looked up into Hermione's eyes, seeking to verify the story; she nodded her smile reaching her eyes. Scrimgeour coughed noisily, breaking me out of my reverie.

"If it's convenient, Leutnant, I need to know everything you have to tell me of the actions of the Black Hand."

"The Black Hand?"

"The organisation that you've been fighting against for the last week," snapped Scrimgeour angrily, as though I was being deliberately thick. "Who did you think Krum was working for?"

"I assumed the Russians."

He scoffed.

"The Russians? Why would the Russians want Chernenko killed? Why would the Russians want to target your father?"

"Someone within the circle of Lords then?"

"Perhaps," said Scrimgeour. "Perhaps if you'd enlighten us to your experiences, I'd have a better picture of what was happening."

I explained everything that had happened, deliberately excluding to discuss my meeting with Fleur and my hideout in Ramatuelle. At my tale's conclusion, Scrimgeour nodded, but looked irate.

"What you have done, Leutnant, has set our efforts back at least a year. You've killed our only solid link to the Black Hand and have gained absolutely no information." He glared at me for a moment. "Entirely useless."

He rose, ostensibly in anger and turned his back upon us. Hermione gave me a contrite expression. Scrimgeour continued.

"I shall intervene on your behalf on the account of your father. It would be best if you were to go to meet Riddle in Africa until we can clear your name. You will take a muggle bus through the Alps to Venice where you will meet a plane which will take you to Catania, where you can take a boat to Africa." I nodded and opened my mouth to speak, but he cut across me. "On no account will you do anything other than per my instruction, you've botched enough of our operation already."

It was later that evening that I found myself on a bus that would take two days to arrive at its destination; taking me through Austria and through the Alps before creeping its way down the eastern coast of Italy.

For the first four hours or so, the bus was packed full of day labourers commuting from Prague to the picturesque hedgerows and snow covered farmhouses of the Elbe basin.

I sat in my seat and tried to imagine these roads in the heat of summer, even now as the last fingers of winter still clawed persistently at the encroaching spring, the breeze that seeped through the open windows smelled of frothy barley wine and the boughs of the low hanging Sycamore trees brushed over the roof of the bus like rain.

I wasn't aware when my thoughts, as they so often did at times like these, drifted to Fleur and those glorious days in Carcassonne. I imagined her then in those idyllic, romantic contrasts that plague the young; laying in the sun, her blonde hair spread around her, an incredible smile on her face, the beech tree at Nebo.

Too soon however, we crossed the Orlice River at Lety and those hauntingly beautiful landscapes of the basin, formed of decades of magic lovely woven together, gave way to bleak, rutted, frozen fields. And the thoughts of Fleur and Nebo fell to the wayside.

Despite the cramped and distasteful conditions, I fell asleep as we approached Austria. My dreams were a confusing blend of events from the last few days and my usual dreams of Fleur, until I was fighting Krum in the Delacour château and kissing Hermione beneath the church tower in Aluksne, my blistered, broken hands holding her in a tight embrace.

When I awoke again the bleak flatlands of Southern Czechoslovakia had given way to the mossy outcrops and towering mountains of Austria. I was lying on my side across two seats and I felt an unwavering gratitude to the farmhand I'd been sleeping against for not dumping me upon the floor. As I sat up and looked around, I realised that the population of the bus had thinned considerably.

I was now almost alone, save for two old women who sat on opposite sides of the bus but fixed me with identical reproachful glares and a small, thin man with a receding hairline.

I leaned against the window behind me which jogged my head in time to the rattle of the suspension against the road. My fingers reached into my pockets, seeking a cigarette or a drink, with which to relieve the discomfort that accompanies falling asleep on uncomfortable seats, whilst in the world's oldest bus.

Oddly enough, in the inside pocket of my jacket, my fingers closed around something that I hadn't expected to find; something hard, but flexible. I pulled it free and held it up to the light.

Ledorf's rosary hung from my hand with the dead weight of a corpse. After a moment or two of staring at it, I found myself having to blink back tears from my eyes. The rosary hanging in my hand had changed from some meaningless religious artefact to a symbol for everything that had happened in the last week. The chain of events that had started when I first shot Ledorf in the tower.

The fates of Ritter, Boone, and Alexander Thalburg hung heavily upon the rosary, along with the maiming of Paddy and the murder of Ledorf. The deaths of Chernenko's son and Gina Fabrizi dangled there too along with the dozen or so other

lives I'd taken in the week.

I clenched my fist tightly around the crucifix until the iron bit into my palm, trying to save off the inevitable breakdown that had been looming since I'd killed Krum. I was just beginning to feel the multi-headed hydra of rage, fear and helplessness when the crucifix suddenly burned blisteringly hot in my hand.

I dropped it with a yelp and immediately bent down to retrieve it. As I did so, a bolt of curse-fire flew over my head and blew the seat in front of me into a thousand little pieces that cascaded forward, hissing through the air, like a swarm of angry wasps.

Instantly I turned, my wand drawn, a curse upon my lips. Behind me, where had previously sat a hunched old lady was Fred Weasley, his wand outstretched, his face alight with a macabre excitement.

I deflected his next curse through a window, shattering it as the spell ricocheted off into the night. A thousand shards of glass refracted the curse-light and the bus was sharply lit by an explosion outside, silhouetting Fred against the back window and illuminating the face of his brother, who stood on the other side of the bus.

The driver, clearly startled by the sudden noise and bright blast outside the window, swerved suddenly across the road as he wheeled around in his seat to figure out what was going on. Luckily the mountainous pass had long been devoid of traffic, but if he didn't gain some form of control soon, we'd surely end up a tiny smear on a cliff side.

I held the rosary tightly in my fist as I blocked another curse, this time from George, trying to angle it to the back of the bus, to avoid killing or further distracting the driver.

I took a few moments to assess the situation and realise what serious trouble I was in; although in a confined space, there was at least seven arm lengths between me and my attackers and the cluttered nature of the coach interior meant that I had little chance of engaging them closer. Likewise I certainly was in no position to be defending against two attackers in such a cluttered space. Blocks and shields were all well and good against one opponent, but attempting to shield myself against two formidable opponents was tantamount to suicide. All it would take from them was a little cooperation; they had a serious advantage over me.

As though reading my mind, Fred casually threw a killing curse in my direction, followed immediately by another from George, forcing me to fall to the floor and scramble into the centre aisle. A third killing curse found the small thin man that had also been on the bus, who'd been staring at this sudden turn of developments with a mixture of undisguised horror and fascination. He collapsed to the floor.

"What in God's name?" began the driver in Italian, wheeling around again in his seat and once again passing over the central reservation. He pulled us sharply back into our lane.

I leapt to my feet, wand flashing with the first offensive spell I'd managed to cast. A flash of fire illuminated the bus, hot enough to melt steel, bright enough to conceal me for a moment.

A moment was all I needed; summoning up all of my intent and focus, I lashed out with a vast Foe Hammer curse that ripped away the back wall of the bus, taking the Weasley twins with it.

The driver slammed his feet on the brakes, almost jack knifing the bus across the road. I turned on him angrily.

"What are you doing? Drive!"

"No way!"

A sudden angry noise made us both look back, about fifteen feet behind us, a smoking Fred and George climbed to their feet, murderous expressions on their faces. The driver and I exchanged a glance.

"Drive!" I cried again and he complied, shoving his foot down on the accelerator so hard that I fell against the windscreen. Behind us, Fred and George broke into a run and then, as they fell further and further behind, leapt from the ground.

At first I thought they'd merely used the bounding charm to help them gain speed, but after a moment I realised that they were actually flying. Their robes fluttering out behind them, thick noxious black smoke exuding from their bodies. They were gaining on us.

"Faster! Faster!" I urged and the driver sped up, not even daring to look back.

A killing curse hit one of the windows, shattering it. A second came through the gaping hole at the back of the bus and struck one of the seats, causing it to burst into flames. I climbed out of one of the broken windows, hanging by one arm and tossing curses back, attempting to bring them down.

I heard a cry from inside the coach and fell back inside, looking to the driver.

He simply pointed forwards and said the same word again. "Hill."

I looked and with a sinking feeling in my stomach stared at the tall hill that stretched out in front of us, the hill that would slow us down

enough for the twins to catch up, the hill that would certainly get us killed.

"Accelerate," I said and ran back to the gaping hole. The twins were already within two lengths of our bus and still gaining slightly on us. I heard the bus change gear and we pulled away slightly. I dodged a sickly yellow curse that came hurtling toward me out of the night and aimed a Dueller's Banishing Curse toward them.

A shimmering wave of force erupted from the end of my wand and although they managed to avoid being struck out of the air, it forced them enough out of their intended trajectory to give us at least an extra minute.

As the incline began to become noticeable, the driver dropped the bus into the lowest possible gear and revved the engine, powering up the increasingly steep hill. But despite the driver's obvious ability, the twins were still gaining on us.

A hail of spellfire forced me to retreat a little way into the bus. As they came closer, I became aware of the noise that was produced by their movement through the air; the flapping of their cloaks in the air, accompanied by a noise that sounded like paper being torn.

By tracking this noise, I was able to estimate their position and once they were within range, I began cursing through the roof of the bus. I attacked with a flurry of superheated fireballs, which tore through the roof of the bus with ease and began to pepper the air around the twins, who had to back off slightly to avoid being incinerated.

From this I was able to deduce that their flying spell, whilst allowing them to act offensively, didn't allow them to shield effectively. This gave me two choices, either use extremely fast moving, extremely accurate spells, or use spells with blast zones so large that they couldn't possibly avoid them. Considering the cramped conditions I was fighting in, I went with the former.

As we came over the crest of the hill and onto a flat mountain plain, I climbed back through the window and, hanging on with one arm, tossed two precision cutting curses at them. They veered off course once more to avoid the curses and put the bus between me and them. I leant back into the bus to attack them from inside once more but saw no sign of them.

Just as I recognised the bluff, I heard the easily recognisable noise of their flight coming from behind me. I whipped out my arm just in time, jostling the wrist of the twin and sending his point-blank killing curse flying impotently into the air.

I grabbed his wand arm with my free arm, my own wand hand desperately clinging to the inside of the bus and pulled him sharply forward, bouncing him off the side of the bus and to the ground, where he rolled a few feet as he suddenly decelerated.

I'd seen one too many quidditch accidents at school to assume that this sort of fall would stop a wizard for long, particularly ones as psychotic as the Weasley Twins.

I heard the second twin burst through one of the windows inside the bus and with no other immediate option, I wrenched myself up through the window I was leaning out of and onto the roof of the bus.

I scrambled across it, lurching dangerously each time the driver turned the bus slightly. I was just preparing to toss another salvo of fireballs through the roof at where I estimated the twin's position when the one I'd just thrown from the bus came at me out of the night, taking me around the waist and smashing me into the roof of the bus.

He must have lost his wand in the fall, or was too incoherently angry for words, because he seized me by the throat and attempted to strangle me. By the fact he had two working eyes, I was able to deduce that it was Fred that was trying to strangle me.

Knowing this, I struck him in the left side of his chest with all the force I could muster, knowing that his heart would still be weak after the curse I hit him with only days ago.

His eyes widened for a moment before he snarled in pain, releasing his grip slightly. I kicked him away and tried to rise to my feet. He came at me again, flying through the air and I delivered a straight punch to his face, dropping to my knees and twisting to the side, allowing his stunned form to fly over my head and drop out of sight on the other side of the bus.

I momentarily celebrated this small victory before I heard a cry from inside the coach. Moving as quickly as I could, I came around to the driver's window and swung downward through it, feet first. Connecting both with the face of George, who was attempting to bite the driver's face.

He gave a strangled cry and stumbled backwards, teetering for a moment on the edge of the single step down toward the door. I gave him a powerful shove just as the driver pulled the handle that opened the doors. George fell out of the bus and disappeared into the night.

"Nicely done," I commented and he nodded gruffly.

We came down on the other side of the hill we'd just gone up and roared through Mallnitz, a sleepy hamlet nestled in narrow valley, at about seventy miles an hour. I prayed to whatever was listening that there wasn't a child in the street.

As it was, there weren't any children in the street, what was parked by the side of the road though, were two white cars marked with 'Polizei' which roared into life as we whipped past them, sirens crying shrilly into the night. The driver looked as though he might cry.

"Don't stop," I warned him.

"I'll lose my license for this."

"Better your license than your life."

We sped onwards, clearly bewildering the four officers within the cars, who stared open-mouthed as I stood in the gaping hole at the back of the bus, in preparation for dealing with the return of the twins. One of them waved his hands in the universal sign for 'pull over' but I shrugged my shoulders and shook my head apologetically.

Just as the police clearly decided that whoever had commandeered the bus was clearly insane and began to act to bring the reckless driving to a halt, Fred and George Weasley appeared out of the darkness again, their torn robes fluttering even more dramatically as they came head on towards the bus, George flying through the windscreen and down the aisle toward me, whilst Fred fluttered out of sight.

The redhead hit me like a tonne of bricks fired from a high velocity cannon and sent me flying through the air and crashing onto the bonnet of the lead police car, which, either from shock or good judgement, didn't stop or slow down. One of them attempted to climb through the front passenger window and grab me, but I evaded his grasp and rose slightly, ready to leap back into the bus.

Fred Weasley suddenly glided out of the darkness, landing on top of me, leading with all fours and pinning me to the bonnet. After a moment during which we grappled, both trying to throw each other off the car, he hit me solidly in the face twice with an open fist. I felt my nose break as he hit me the first time and twisted my face away as he brought his hand down again, so that his blow grazed the side of my face. He was just in the process of raising his arm a third time when the officer in the passenger seat leant out of the window and shot him twice at point blank range, throwing him from the car.

I winced slightly as the wheels of the squad car rolled over him with a disgusting crunching noise and heard the second car screech to a halt to avoid hitting him. I turned to look at the police officer, who was looking at me with wide eyes, gun still raised. I knocked it away immediately and turned back to the bus where George appeared to be attacking the driver again, if its swerves across the road were anything to go by.

I made a calculated leap from the bonnet of the car as gap closed and just about managed to scramble through the obliterated rear of the bus. The police car behind me swerved and braked, almost crashing through the barrier at the side of the road as I blocked his line of sight. Ignoring it, I charged down the central aisle and hit George with a bludgeoning curse that knocked him back out of the windscreen he'd just come through.

With astonishing presence of mind and impressive reflexes, he seized hold of the rim of the window he'd been thrown through and hung doggedly to the front of the bus. I walked over and was just about to wrench his hands clear of the window when Fred Weasley appeared in the open door of the bus.

The bullet wounds he'd suffered had spilled blood all down his front and had either the bullets or his trip under the front wheels of the squad car had perforated his lungs, because blood ran freely from

his mouth. His face looked as though it had been caught in some sort of industrial press, few of his teeth remained and his skull was clearly cracked and misshapen. I would have been impressed he was still standing, were he not pointing a pistol at me.

Our journey through the Alps that had taken us through Mallnitz was now taking us around the multi-tiered cliff face that skirted the Millstat See, a thin lake that ran along the base of the Millstat valley.

I reacted immediately and decisively, bringing my elbow to bear and knocking the gun away. It discharged over my shoulder, ricocheting off something metallic. I followed through with my left shoulder and struck out with my right fist, striking him in the throat. I whipped out a left hook that knocked the gun to the floor. Then, without any flourish, with barely a thought to my action, raised my wand.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The jet of green light struck Fred in the throat, there was a look of stunned incomprehension on his features for a moment, before the power of the curse lifted him off his feet in an arc that carried him into the air. I caught a last glimpse of him as he plummeted backwards, down to the steely, freezing waters a thousand feet below.

George gave an ear-splitting cry, somewhere between rage and raw pain and then leapt from the front of the bus, chasing his brother's corpse to the lake below. I turned to the driver, with a stoic air of heroism on my face, trying to summon some suitable one-liner that would make me look slick.

However, when I turned and caught sight of the blood pouring thickly from his face and neck, all thoughts of heroism fled my mind and I stepped forward, my wand raised ready for an attempt to stop the bleeding. He raised his hand to stop me, he knew as well as I that I couldn't close the curse wound in time.

"It was a good try," he gasped and slowly brought the bus to a stop. He clambered out of the driver's seat, one hand pressed against his throat and climbed down the step and out of the bus. I followed him slowly, reluctant to leave our escape vehicle. He stared out over the lake, trimmed with snow and smiled gently. Then turned to me again and held out his hand.

At first I thought he was offering it to me to shake, but I realised that he was holding out Ledorf's rosary. I took it. "You should keep hold of this. You'll need it."

Then he sat down, back to the lake, head leant against the road barrier, staring at his wrecked bus and died.

As I wheeled the bus through the outskirts of Venice the astounded looks I received bordered on the edge of the hilarity. The bus, in fairness, was riddled with holes. It lacked a rear and a windscreen and a door hung from its side, held in place with a single bent strip of metal. If I wasn't very slightly detached from reality, I probably would have abandoned the bus here somewhere and made my way to the airport via other means, but there was a hugely sentimental part of me deep inside that ached to see the bus and its driver complete their final journey together, as ridiculous as it was.

So it was the incredulous look on the bus depot manager's face that greeted me as the battered old coach finally limped into his forecourt and came to a grinding, screeching halt and finally abandoned the will to live with a noisy bang. It was only as I pulled the keys from the ignition that I realised that I'd gathered a rather large crowd of people who'd followed me to the bus depot. Several policemen, who I imagined would very much like to take me into custody, paced around nervously, inspecting the damage.

Long raucous applause greeted my descent from the front steps of the bus, further heightening the surrealism of the moment. I half turned to face the baby faced mechanic, who was staring at me in bemusement and wiping his oily hands on a rag. I tossed the keys to him and said in my rusty Italian, which in fairness, only failed me at the last moment.

"Park it up for me, mustard."

I walked a little way away from the bus and the crowd parted for me, allowing me through. Two policemen stepped forward, holding up badges and fingers surely not too far away from guns.

"Leutnant Potter?" one asked, in careful English. I held up a hand to silence him.

"Not now son, I'm in the zone." I walked straight past him.

"We were asked by Oberst Scrimgeour to escort you to the military airstrip."

I stopped and then turned. I didn't exactly want to trust myself into their care, but then, what choice did I have? I could fight them sure, but running from the authorities while George Weasley was very possibly still hunting me. Also, taking that into consideration, along with whatever the Black Hand could throw at me, I'd be stupid to refuse and as long as they didn't attempt to confiscate my wand, I was sure I'd be okay.

"Fine, lead on," I replied half-heartedly, expecting to have a disagreement about handing over my weapons. There was none.

They led me to a small car, similar to the ones that had been chasing my bus and held the door open for me as I climbed into back seat. They closed the door firmly behind me and then took their respective positions in the front seat.

The drive, in hindsight, was fairly short. Although it seemed far longer at the time, an unfortunate side effect of the extreme paranoia I was feeling at the time.

I'd spent my entire life on the right side of the system. Growing, training and fighting for whatever ideology was demanded of me, providing it was passed down through the correct channels. I'd done what my Emperor expected of me and what my commanding officer bid me to.

Likewise, I'd only seen the highly polished, presentable face of the Empire. The grim underbelly had been hidden from view by a mountain of paperwork, by elegant navy uniforms and by a wall of bureaucracy.

So, to find myself on the opposite side of the system, to discover first-hand the flaws in the Empire and to feel its misguided wrath against a loyal denizen was disconcerting. It was as though I'd dived through the flawless surface of an idyllic lake, to find raw sewage below.

We arrived at the airport to find a plane ready and fuelled for take-off. The two policemen bid me farewell and I nodded my thanks and then moved on to shake the hand of my pilot who beamed at me with extraordinary enthusiasm.

"Lieutenant Potter, I presume!" he barked jovially, in the sort of accent that was bought alongside public schooling. "We'll get you airborne in a jiffy, old boy. Just need to get old Bettie rolling, you know."

I quickly deduced that he was a muggle of rich parentage and most likely had friends with names like Bingo Fiddlesworth. He gripped my hand firmly and shook with all the vigour he could muster.

"To whom do I have the pleasure?" I asked, trying my best English.

"I'm Thomas Audsley," he answered, as though it was of little relevance. "You can call me Tommy, of course."

"In that case, call me Harry."

The cabin of the plane turned out to be exceptionally luxurious and Thomas proudly confirmed my suspicions that it belonged to Riddle himself. Take-off was smoother than any I'd ever experienced, meaning that either Tommy was an incredible pilot or there were some serious enchantments on the aircraft. Or both.

I spent the duration of the flight worrying about my fast approaching audience with Riddle. I'd been completely unable, thus far, to get a good read on the man's intentions. He certainly appeared to be in league with my father, or at least shared similar interests. Whether their common goals were in my best interest, however, was still questionable.

What I did know about Riddle was that he could be a useful ally and an exceptionally deadly enemy. He had an exceptional level of clout both politically and magically. He was a dangerous man; intelligent and ruthless, hardly the ideal choice of qualities you'd appreciate in someone who seemed partial to interfering in your life.

Then again, he had enough clout with the Emperor to wipe the tarnish from my family name.

Anyway, it wasn't as though I had much choice.

The flight went without incident and I was met in Catania by a milk lorry, which would escort me to my boat. Audsley bade me farewell with a promise that he'd be seeing me again in four days time. I shuddered at the prospect; I'd spent almost thirty six hours being shuffled from vehicle to vehicle across Europe and now across the Mediterranean Sea, the thought of doing this much travelling again anytime soon was enough to send shivers up my spine.

Nevertheless, I thanked him thoroughly and climbed into the horribly cramped cab of the lorry inhabited by a less than hospitable, surly looking Italian. He greeted me with a curt grunt and then puffed stolidly on an astounding number of cigarettes for the thirty minute drive through the city of Catania.

I hadn't been in much of a state to see Venice as I had passed through in the early hours of the morning. But now, as we traversed the city centre, I found myself admiring the city's Italian vibrancy as much as I had admired the majestic architecture of Riga.

The sunlight poured through gaps between the tall buildings, bathing the streets in intermittent sunlight that refracted from the white marble of city landmarks. Clothes trembled on stretched lines between balconies and over streets that hummed with the furore of frustrated traffic.

The city had the character that seems to infiltrate all Italian cities, a bustle of life, energy and impatience. Yet beneath the skin of tension, there was the irremovable essence of lethargy that seemed to accompany the Mediterranean climate.

The Port in Catania was no less a fantastic sight than the harbour in St. Tropez that I was so familiar with. While the boats were not as obviously gaudy and expensive, their spotless white hulls gleamed in the sunshine. Tiny waves gurgled through propellers and against moorings, throwing the salty tang of seawater into the air.

I was passed from my silent and eternally smoking driver to a stalwart but equally brooding captain who escorted me along the jetties and between rows of gleaming yachts.

I'd expected to be hauled unceremoniously on to a ferry or fishing boat and left to brine in three inches of seawater, or be somehow subjected to some other horrendous mode of transport. However, the vessel that we stepped on to was a fully rigged, extremely large, sailing yacht.

The cabin was fitted out in pine and leather; a modern, but not unattractive décor that spoke of luxury, wealth and class. I walked around a little, expecting to find very little else of interest but instead found that the boat was much larger inside than it could have possibly been from the outside.

I could tell, without even trying, that extremely powerful enchantments were layered all over the inside cabins. This, more than anything else, spoke of the wealth that had funded this investment.

The crossing took far less time than I could have expected and in such comfort that it was all far too soon when I was chivvied out of the cabin and on to the deck.

I leapt from the vessel and up to the solid stone jetty which took me to dry land. I could see a large, open topped staff car waiting patiently ahead. A tall driver standing to attention and a less distinct figure sitting nonchalantly in the back of the vehicle.

I could tell from here it was Riddle.

There was an authority in his posture, a power that he radiated that had nothing to do with magic. A confidence that seemed to fall easily upon his shoulders.

As I approached I hastily attempted to shuffle my clothing into something that resembled that of a Leutnant, but with clothes I'd worn for two days and through a pitched battle on the back of a moving bus, I couldn't look anything but ragged.

The driver stepped forward and snapped off a salute that I returned wearily. Riddle leapt from the staff car, not even bothering to open the door, something that ill-fitted his station, but made him seem all the more impressive for it.

He wrung my hand powerfully and clapped me on the shoulder joyfully as though greeting a lifelong friend.

"Harry!" he exclaimed, then paused. "Or would you prefer Leutnant?"

"Harry, by your leave, sir."

"Nonsense, nonsense, Harry. Call me Tom. I heard you had a bit of trouble on the way here from the old boys in blue that met you off the bus. So I brought you some essentials; a spare uniform, chocolate and-" Here he winked conspiratorially. "-some Ogden's Finest!"

Although I was already cautious from his open, joyous attitude, I managed to force a wan smile onto my face. Perhaps it was paranoia, perhaps it was merely spending days on end where everyone I met attempted to physically harm me. Perhaps it was unreasonable of me, but I was suspicious of him immediately.

Yet left with very few options but to comply; Riddle could obliterate me on the spot. I had no choice but to climb in the car when the driver pulled open the door for me.

Upon the seat between Riddle and I was a uniform, neatly pressed and folded. I eyed it warily.

"I'd stick on the jacket and cap if I were you," suggested Riddle from outside the car. He was obviously waiting for my stalwart ferryman, who was now walking leisurely up from the jetty. "It gets awfully hot here and the uniform is enchanted to protect you from the worst of the elements. Don't want to die of sunstroke now, do we?"

I winced at his words, but slipped the hat and jacket on anyway. He either didn't notice the grimace or ignored it.

As I pulled the jacket over my shoulders, I noticed something drastically different about it. No longer was it the steel blue of the Luftwaffe, but was instead grey and adorned with the darker contrasts of the SS. I glanced quizzically at Riddle, who returned the look with one of slight amusement.

"Congratulations, Obersturmführer," he said softly, then turned and exchanged some words with the sailor in rapid Italian that I had no hope of understanding. He turned back to me and laughed at my perplexed expression. Then he said, as though explaining to a small child, "Harry, I did say I'd snap you up to an SS division sooner or later. Welcome to my personal administrative staff."

I made a face of disgust at that and he laughed again, this time shaking his head.

"Perhaps a desk job will manage to prevent you from suffering an attempt on your life once every two days." He dismissed the sailor with a few terse words of Italian and then hopped into the car beside me, accidentally exposing the Iron Cross around his neck as he did.

As we drove through the city, Riddle pressed me with questions about my experiences in the last week or so, lingering heavily on my fights with Chernenko, Krum and the Weasley twins. I could tell he was using legilimency to skim surface thoughts out of my mind but he refrained from digging any deeper than the images of the fights and so I allowed him to content himself.

After some time he seemed to lose interest in the subject and fell into deep consideration, allowing me to stare at my surroundings in interest.

Tripoli had long been the Empire's established central trade hub in this part of the world and from the buildings around me I could see that this had made it an exceptionally wealthy city.

There hadn't been much left of Tripoli in 1945 and what was left had long been demolished to make way for progress. What stood here now was a testament to progress. Tall buildings of steel and dark glass reached high into the sky, parted by vast wide roads of gleaming tarmac.

I had never seen anything like this, this architect's playground. European cities had remained almost completely unchanged since the turn of the century, despite a slow unstoppable expansion outward. Tripoli, with its stunning skyline and cylindrical towers of twisted steel was alien to me.

Riddle had obviously noticed my stupor, for he suddenly spoke.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" I turned to face him and found that he too had craned his neck in order to run his eyes over the dizzying heights above. "It's my favourite city in the world, Tripoli. It is the realisation of progress, of human endeavour. Of our dominion, our power." He looked at me again and I could see something raw in his eyes for a moment before he looked upward once more. "Progress, Harry, for the sake of progress, must be encouraged."

Chapter VI

The world Grindlewald had envisaged, the world he forged was radically different than anything that had come before it. The majority of European wizards and witches who'd fought against him fell into hiding. Those who didn't, however, suffered no reprisals. Nor did the muggleborns, halfbloods or muggles face persecution, as so many had feared. For Grindlewald cared nothing of blood, loyalty or magic. He cared only for power and those who could wield it.

Those who'd fought valiantly against his cause were welcomed with open arms into the upper echelons of his Empire. The muggle leaders of countries were almost all persuaded to remain in power and run their nations as virtually independent countries. The power of the Empire was turned inward, used to repair the damages of the war. Its wealth invested in infrastructure.

Grindlewald conquered nations, killed their young men and then showered them with money and adulation. He allowed them to maintain their cultures, their political systems and their daily life. He built hospitals emblazoned with his name, had food handed out on street corners in the ghettos of Warsaw, Budapest and Minsk. He personally oversaw the demolition of the concentration camps and the building of monuments at each of the sites.

Despite a little indecision, key members of the Jewish faith, the Vatican and prominent Protestant clergymen became a staple presence in the power structure of the Empire at Grindlewald's insistence. There was common ground found between the concepts of religion and witchcraft. Most importantly Grindlewald began to introduce doubt into the minds of those who'd fought against him; no longer could they be sure that they'd been fighting for a just cause.

And so, little by little, Grindlewald won the hearts and minds of those he'd conquered. Little by little, he united the countries of Europe under his banner and they adored him for it.

By giving the people of Europe a faux independence, he made invisible the nets, cages and ropes that bound them to his whim.

A cool dusk breeze touched the back of my neck as I watched the vibrant city below wind down for another still evening. The market

vendors began to pack up their wares and the teeming crowd of happy punters dispersed to their homes and families.

The cafe in which I sat, with its gleaming stainless steel bar and furniture upholstered in black leather would transform within the hour from my quiet haven to a trendy bar, complete with the smells of beer, desperation and sweat.

I finished my coffee with casual shrug of the tiny cup and had just closed my book in preparation of leaving when a young woman sat delicately next to me. I glanced up in surprise and was quite startled by the vision of beauty before me.

She allowed me just enough time to drink in her plush full lips, her plunging neckline, gracefully tapered legs and the way she stretched her turquoise evening dress in all the right places. Then she offered me her hand and a smile.

I took them both delicately and grazed her exquisite fingers with my lips. Her smile widened into a reluctant giggle.

"You're a roué, Obersturmführer Potter."

I rose immediately, all thoughts of her beauty pushed behind me as I put the chair I'd just vacated between us, my fingers resting on the hilt of my wand.

"Who are you?" I demanded, my voice descending to a growl.

She looked me over and raised an eyebrow in an expression I couldn't read.

"I am Cho Chang," she said simply and I swallowed slightly, I recognised the name. Cho Chang was the Chinese ambassador to Leipzig, but was better known to me as a formidable duellist. I didn't move for a moment and she snorted with impatience. "Sit down, Harry. I am here as a guest of Riddle's, it was he who directed me here."

I sat down again, but opposite her, placing the table between us. She shook her head and gave me a rueful laugh.

"Why are you here?"

"To enjoy my evening in Tripoli, Harry. May I call you Harry?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

The cafe was filling with clubbers now, all of them young and stunningly good looking. Cho's eyes flickered over them with barely disguised lust and I rose to leave.

"Well enjoy your evening then, Ambassador Chang. I have no doubt I'll see you-"

She seized me by the wrist and fixed me with an annoyed look.

"Don't be ridiculous Obersturmführer, you must dance with me."

The cafe had just begun to play a beat that would make Mozart spin in his grave and several of the young couples had already taken to a makeshift dance floor. I had never felt so stuffy and boring in my life, I'd become old and joyless far before my time. I felt a smile part my lips.

"One dance," I said, mischievously and she smiled broadly at me.

"Come."

She lead me by my hand to the dance floor, where she immediately pressed herself far closer to me than the song demanded. She wrapped her arms around me and leant forward into the crook of my neck, her lips grazing my skin.

"Do all Ambassadors dance like this?" I asked with a laugh.

"Just me," she replied, barely audible over the sound of the beat. Then she smiled and lifted her head to whisper directly into my ear. "They're generally not as good a fuck, either."

Cho returned to Leipzig in the morning, for which I was grateful. The remainder of my time in this nirvana was some of the best I'd ever experienced; by day I walked the harbour front, took long leisurely swims in the cyan blue sea and lay on perfect sandy beaches in the shade of a towering palm. In the evenings, Riddle and I would

discuss politics, history and a thousand other topics at lengths as we ate in the best restaurants.

It was not perfect however, thoughts of Fleur plagued my waking hours and as I lazed sleepily on the beaches of my idyllic paradise, I couldn't help but feel her absence more strongly for the perfection that surrounded me.

It was only the assurances from Riddle that he was reverently working to clear my own name, as well as my father's that prevented me from writing to her and asking her to join me.

Over the days, I managed to construct a rough outline of the Empire's political state. Headlines and news bulletins caught my attention now and then, the war had become public knowledge, which meant that either the infrastructure of the Empire was failing and word had leaked, or far more likely, we were beginning to win.

Indeed, the intelligence documents that Riddle often brought to the dinner table would often corroborate my theories. It was frustrating however, to be so far from the action, to be relegated to a position in which I could have no influence what so ever.

Riddle seemed to recognise this, as one morning five days after I'd arrived in Tripoli, he handed me a thick dossier which I took eagerly. He settled himself in the sand next to me, looking as composed as always, as though it were completely usual for a senior ranking officer of the SS to lie on the beach.

Despite his relaxed appearance, I'd begun to notice signs of strain in Riddle. He'd begun to let his usually immaculate appearance fall; thick dark stubble covered his jaw and cheeks, his shirt was only half-tucked and thick dark rings had appeared around his eyes.

I regarded him coolly; my thumb riffled the pages of the dossier competitively.

"When was the last time you slept for a full ten hours?" I asked, surprised to find a slight tone of accusation creeping into my voice. He sighed and looked toward the sky.

"I don't remember," he admitted and shrugged. I didn't feel in a position to chastise him any further so I looked back at the folder in my hands.

"Top Secret?" I asked, my amusement making the tone of my voice light. Riddle snorted.

"We're heading back to Riga," he said softly, though his tone held more foreboding than I appreciated from my senior officers.

"Because we're needed? Or because you're itching for a fight?"

Riddle didn't answer immediately, but looked out over the stunningly blue sea that stretched out before us. I wagered I knew the answer.

"They're mounting a serious attack."

"That's not what's worrying me," snapped Riddle. "Chernenko knows he can't win. We've been reinforcing the area for days, he must know that if he attacks again he'll be crushed and our counter attack will sweep into Russia."

Suddenly, a hundred little things clicked together in my mind, as though someone had added the decisive jigsaw piece and now I could see the picture. Why the Russians chose to invade through Latvia, the reason we were ordered to defend Riga at all costs, the reason my unit was sent there in the first place.

"What's in Riga?" I asked, feeling the heat begin to rise in me, the indignation of being used as a pawn. Riddle stared at me impassively.

"It's not what's in Riga, as much as what's under it," he said gently and I felt my temper flare again. I knew he wasn't going to tell me. He didn't know if he could trust me.

"Whatever it is, Chernenko is going to kill an awful lot of his own men to retrieve it."

"It's certainly worth it."

I stared at Riddle a moment, stunned at the idea of something that valuable being stored under Riga.

"Okay, so even if there's this thing, how is Chernenko going to get at it? It's not as though he's going to punch through our lines now that they've been reinforced."

"Take a look in that dossier."

I flicked it open tentatively with my thumb and gazed in surprise at the first page where there was nothing but a black and white photograph of what appeared to be a battleship.

"A battleship?" I asked, confused. "New technology?"

Riddle smiled painfully as though I'd just told a bad joke.

"It flies."

"It what?"

"Flies."

I wasn't exactly sure what to say. Riddle seemed to sympathise and flipped to the next page for me, where I saw that the ship was equipped with a complete set of guns on both the deck and the underside of the ship. I flicked through the dossier, staring at each subsequent page with increasing bewilderment. According to the document in my hands the ship was not only armed to the teeth with all manner of cannon and small arms, it was also the subject of a ridiculous list of enchantments ranging from projectile barricades to layers of magic diffusing wards.

"I need you to destroy it," said Riddle and I looked up from the dossier. The expression on his face managed to be solemn, grave and yet somehow reassuring at the same time. "I wouldn't ask this of anyone, but if there's anyone I think can manage this, it's you. I'd go myself, if I didn't need to stop Chernenko. But it's your choice; I won't order you to do this."

We stared at each other for a moment, I thought about refusing, but I think deep down I knew that I would have gone to the ends of the earth for Riddle. I nodded briskly and rose.

"When do I leave?"

"Immediately," replied Riddle, who stood elegantly and took two steps toward me. His hand came to rest on my shoulder and he gave it a powerful yet comforting squeeze. "You're a brilliant wizard, Harry; A great man."

"There's more to being a wizard than this," I replied dutifully.

"You're right; you're a fantastic soldier, of course. But knowing that there's more to life than fighting. Knowing that there's something under all this that isn't hard and violent and dirty. Now that's-" he paused and after another firm squeeze, turned away. "Well, that's what makes a great man. Believe me."

And I did.

We took the Skitterleap to Riga about two hours later, on the drive to the Tripoli Skitterleap centre, Riddle briefed me more fully and outlined his plan. I was to get on the ship via a Skitterdisc and do my best to bring down the defences, allowing the anti-air crews on the ground to do their work.

The first thing that struck me as I stepped off the plate in the Skitterleap Chamber was the smell of gunpowder and woodsmoke that hung thick in the air. I realised at once how bad the fighting had gotten around Riga, the attendants managed to be both jumpy and depressed at the same time. A few snapped to attention at the sight of Riddle and myself, but most simply ignored us, rushing around and bustling the high ranking officials that surrounded us into various corners as they prepared their evacuation.

Riddle guided me powerfully through the room, once or twice bowling an attendant or member of parliament to the floor as he steered us through the teaming room.

For the second time, I stepped out of the door of the Latvian Institute for Technology and into the rain. Thick beads of warm rain ran down my face, leaving trails of ash on my face. I gritted my teeth as I looked around me; almost two thirds of the skyline was ablaze. Flames swept by the angry howling grazed the wards around us, the building behind us an unscathed haven in the midst of the burning city.

The street before us was full of people, hundreds of Rigans desperate for evacuation pressing against a thin line of soldiers who had been tasked with holding them back. The scene tugged at my heartstrings for a moment before a fresh wave of determination flushed through me.

Together we fought our way through the crowd, who for the most part completely ignored us. Once free, we set off at a run through the burning streets. The sounds of our footfalls lost to the din of the flames and the fighting.

As we breached the outer layer of the protections placed upon the building, a wave of heat rushed over us and ash and rain battered my face in equal measures, forcing me to look through slitted eyes as we battled our way through the wind.

We forced ourselves onward until we reached the rendezvous where we were to meet the force tasked with both destroying the airship and preventing Chernenko from reaching his goal beneath Riga.

Ten minutes later, we arrived at a tall marble building that overlooked the river. The top two floors seemed to have been caved in earlier in the fighting by some form of artillery, but the vast wooden doors still stood slightly ajar, guarded by a familiar face.

"Cedric!" I cried as we approached and the scarred, carefree face grinned back at me. I couldn't help but notice that he'd gained a number of scars since I'd last seen him.

He pulled me in through the door and then followed Riddle inside, pulling the door shut behind us.

"Are we the last?" asked Riddle glancing around at the twenty or so assembled wizards and witches stood huddled in the vast foyer.

Many of the faces I recognised and I found myself slightly humbled as I realised that these were the foremost Europe had to offer in magical talent.

The most notable stood amongst them was Antonin Dolohov, the foremost duelling instructor in Europe and outfitted in immaculate combat dragonhide. Two to his left was Madame Marino, former spy and assassin whose underhanded casting technique was studied

the world over. Lastly, four to the right of Marino was my father, former soldier and expert curse-breaker.

Stood a little way from the group was Cho Chang and Riddle immediately stepped forward and greeted her as though she was an old friend. I could trust her if Riddle could.

We arranged ourselves in a loose circle around Riddle and I let my eyes drift around the motley collection of people before me; soldiers in immaculate uniforms, operatives draped in bandoliers, a senior official in the Gestapo in a long leather trench coat, Cho Chang in a formal silk robe.

Directly opposite me in the circle was my father, standing straight-backed in an outfit that looked as though it harked back to the days when he worked as a treasure hunter in Egypt, topped off with a wide-brimmed fur felt hat that was pulled low over his eyes.

My eyes fell upon Riddle, who rotated slowly his eyes fixing each of us in turn before he finally spoke.

"What we're going to do today is probably the most important thing any of us will ever do," he said gruffly. There was no sign of his normal eloquence now and somehow that pressed the urgency of the job even harder upon us. "There is something in the catacombs beneath Riga that we cannot allow Chernenko to get his hands on, at any cost. However, we find ourselves in more peril than we previously thought; Chernenko's airship has been completed far in advance of our expectations. It will be here tonight.

"This leaves us in a predicament, the bulk of our forces must remain in the catacombs to defend them from Chernenko. Yet if we do not destroy the airship we shall surely fall. To this end, I am sending Diggory and Potter here to take deal with the airship."

The deathly silence did not change in response to this announcement but I saw my father's eyes widen in surprise. I looked at Cedric who nodded stoically in my direction. A warmth spread through me, if there was anyone here on who I could rely, it was Diggory.

"Miss Granger in the next room will give you the Skitterdiscs you need. When you two complete your task, you are to return here. Understood?"

Both Diggory and I nodded and took this as permission to leave; we broke away from the group. As we walked away, he shot me a grin and held something out to me.

"I managed to retrieve this for you."

I glanced down at it; my sword. I took it gratefully and was just about to thank him when a voice shouted my name from behind me. I turned to see my father stood a little way away from the group.

"I'll catch up to you, Cedric," I said and crossed the floor towards my father.

He regarded me silently for a moment and then his eyes fell upon the crucifix around my neck.

"I was under the impression that you despised religion."

"People change, father."

There was a brief uncomfortable pause.

"You think you can manage this?" he asked finally

"Yes."

"Well I never doubted your courage," He regarded me for a moment with something like sadness and then reached out an arm which I shrugged off. A look of hurt flushed over his face. "Harry-"

"No," I interjected sharply. "You're going to say something like good luck, or I love you, or I'll see you on the other side. You've never wasted platitudes on me before, so don't fucking start now."

"You've become a great man," he said, his face suddenly flushed with anger. "But you've always been an awful son."

I stood for a moment, flabbergasted at what he'd just said to me. Then I bit back the angry retort that came shook my head and turned away from him.

"Harry," he called after me and though I didn't stop, it didn't make his parting words any less heartbreaking. "It was your damn fault, Harry."

Cedric and Hermione were waiting for me on the other side of the door and I was immediately seized in a bone crushing hug by the latter. I waited a moment while she sobbed into my uniform then gently prised her away.

The moment she was detached from my jacket, she became instantly more businesslike, turning away from me and reaching for two discs upon a table in the corner. She handed us each one and then met my eyes with her slightly glazed ones.

"We've predicted the path of the airship and targeted these Skitterdiscs accordingly; the steering of the ship works with a similar enough magic to the wards containing the Skitterchambers that we should be able to deposit you fairly close to the bridge. We've got to be precise with the timings though as we're not going to get a second shot at this. You've got exactly two minutes and fourteen seconds, so get ready."

I stood for a moment with my neck tilted and my eyes closed, grounding myself for the fight that loomed before me. I pushed the thoughts of Hermione, my father and Fleur from the front of my mind as I desperately battled against my aggravated emotions.

"Harry," said Hermione softly and I opened my eyes reluctantly. She was stood very close to me, gazing up at me. Without warning she grabbed both sides of my face and pulled me into a lingering kiss.

"Good luck," she whispered and stepped away. Cedric gaped at me.

"Ten seconds," said Hermione suddenly and I gripped my disc very tightly. As she counted us in, I fought desperately against the overwhelming wave of emotions that rose within me.

My journey through the Skitterleap was, this time, unusually easy. No phantom creatures stalked me through the mist this time and I

was overwhelmingly surprised when I abruptly found myself in unfamiliar surroundings.

I heard Diggory move behind me and I took a moment to survey our surroundings for a moment before I turned back to him. We were in an interior room of the ship, one filled with crates of ammunition and weaponry, a number of pipes ran along one wall of the room and some sort of fluid leaked down them.

"Well I don't think much of Russian craftsmanship," remarked Diggory off-hand, looking scathingly at the large patches of rust that pock-marked the walls. He grinned at me momentarily before becoming serious once again. "Wands out, then?"

I nodded and pulled mine from its holster, as I did, my hand brushed something hard in my pocket and I withdrew it cautiously. It was another rosary, identical to the one I wore around my neck. For a moment I stood staring at it.

"Harry?" asked Diggory in bewilderment and I pushed the rosary back in my pocket, out of sight and out of mind. I took point as we left the room.

It would seem that fate was not on our side, however, for the moment that we stepped through the door of the room and into the corridor below we were suddenly bathed in a red flashing light accompanied by a painfully loud siren that rang through the ship echoing from the steel walls and practically deafening us.

"Do you think they know we're here?" yelled Diggory above the noise in what I assumed to be a sardonic fashion.

We moved quickly, deciphering directions from stencilled Cyrillic lettering emblazoned above the door at the end of the corridor we realised that we were two floors below the bridge, where we needed to reach in order to halt the airship.

As we approached the foot of the first flight of stairs I heard muttered words echoing from the deck above us. At least three Russian voices spoke in harsh tones above the sound of the alarm, clearly waiting in order to ambush us.

I held up a hand to slow Diggory behind me and indicated that there were at least three hostiles above us. I signalled for him to target the roof above us with spellfire and he nodded his understanding.

I moved to the bottom of the stairs, waiting for Diggory to start casting. On the count of three, we both moved at the same time; as he began to pepper the ceiling with red hot lancing spells that melted through the thick metal. I heard at least one cry of pain as I rushed furiously up the stairs, a spell already on my lips.

As I burst through the doorway at the top of the stairs my first spell struck a stunned looking Russian soldier in the chest, a plume of dark fire biting through his chest and incinerating him from the inside out, filling the corridor with a thick black smoke through which I could just about make out the flashes from Cedric's spellfire.

I used the smokescreen afforded by the burning soldier to toss another spell into the corridor beyond him, which I could tell by the accompanying scream had found its mark.

When I heard footsteps running away from me, I began to riddle the area before me with the same spell Diggory had been using in order to prevent a counter attack. As it happened not a single shot was fired at us in retaliation and when the smoke cleared it became apparently why not.

Disregarding the two that I'd killed with my heartburn curse, six Russian soldiers lay dead, Cedric's curses had done their job, puncturing neat little holes through them and cauterizing them afterwards.

Diggory joined me shortly and regarded his handiwork with disinterest.

"Nice work," I said, offhandedly as I tried to determine our next move. He shrugged.

"What a waste," he said and looking at the men again, I couldn't help but agree, a few of them couldn't be older than seventeen and certainly none of them were twenty yet.

I tried to push this out of my mind and indicated to Diggory that we needed to go through a sealed door to our right.

"From what I can tell, they've retreated toward the bridge but if I remember the ship schematics correctly, we can go up a floor and blow through one of the engine room walls in order to cut them off at the next staircase."

As I finished speaking however, a bright crimson spell blew through the wall a little further down the corridor and a Russian warlock leapt through the hole he'd created.

"Get the door open Diggory!" I yelled and stepped between the two, my wand raised. "I'll deal with this one."

I wasn't sure if the Russian had understood my words, but he tilted his head to the side and smiled morosely, bearing teeth filed to points.

His first spell hit my shield with the force of a locomotive. I staggered backwards slightly and a second spell ricocheted off my shield as my centre of balance changed, knocking me to the floor.

I managed to retain enough presence of mind to shield again as I went down and only just managed to stave off death by a whisker as another spell was deflected into the ceiling where it rained molten metal down on me.

"Fuck me," I panted as I climbed to my feet. "You must have eaten your fair share of spinach as a kid."

Once again the wizard displayed teeth that were probably more suited to eating elephants than vegetables. I saw the tell-tale signs of another curse coming my way and by allowing my shield slightly more give managed to deal with it adequately.

There was no finesse or speed in my opponents casting; only the same brute force I'd seen from Chernenko, but without the ability to back it up. As he cast his next spell, I sidestepped and shielded at the same time, deflecting it into the wall on my left and instantly linked my wand movement into an entrail expelling curse which he blocked admirably.

Normally, I would have had a definitive advantage in pure technique, but in these confined corridors which were only two shoulder widths abreast, I was forced into fighting on his terms.

Quickly I formulated my plan and focused solely on blocking and returning his curses. This gave me enough time while he blocked and prepared his next curse to close the distance between us, inch by inch, until he wouldn't be quick enough to block.

I was perhaps three feet away from him when an explosion from my left knocked me against the opposite wall and a second wizard leapt through the sizeable gap and threw himself against me.

Thin but wiry arms wrapped themselves around me, one snaking itself around my neck, the other forcing my wand hand up and away from my body. A gaunt face appeared next to my cheek and another set of pointed teeth snapped at my face as I turned away.

I got a few seconds of a vile, putrid breath on my face as he made another determined attempt to bite me and used his own momentum to deliver a dizzying head butt to his lower jaw.

The next few seconds were lost in a wave of confusing dizziness and the next thing I knew I was slumped in a heap on the floor with the Russian wizard draped over me.

I immediately levelled my wand on the first wizard while my movements were obscured by my human shield and hit him in the chest with a precise killing curse. I turned my wand inward to finish the one laying on me, but he managed to get his wits together quickly enough to force my wand away again.

Reacting swiftly I planted my elbow solidly into his crotch, which although making him howl in pain wasn't enough to make him relinquish his grip on my wrist.

A flash of desperation coursed through me as he tried to sink his teeth into my throat while we struggled on the floor. From the corner of my eye, I saw Diggory raising his wand but knew that he couldn't take a clean shot while we were both wrestling like this.

Quickly, I pulled my free hand that had been staving off his attempt to bite me and sank my index and middle fingers into his eye

sockets. The pain it induced was enough for him to stop struggling for a moment, during which I rose to my knees and holding his head in a grip like a bowling ball, dashed the back of his head against the steel wall twice.

He fell limply to the floor, fragmented messages from his ruined brain causing his leg to twitch pathetically. A flick of my wand was enough to put him down permanently.

Diggory stood over me a moment, staring at the wrecked wizard sprawled across the floor. I bent down to pick up the discarded wand on the floor, Diggory looked at me disapprovingly.

"You shouldn't do that. Steal a wand from the dead."

"It's not like he's going to need it, is it?"

"You're a cold guy, Harry," he said, only just audible over the deafening siren that was still echoing through the entire ship.

Beyond the thin sliver of red light cast through the opening Diggory had left, the engine room was pitch black inside. Lighting the dead wizard's wand with a flourish, I tossed it forward into the dark like a flare, where the sickly green light flew through the air before dropping over the edge of the catwalk inside the door and down into the depths of the engine room below.

We both stepped inside, careful to not walk straight over the un-railed edge and while I peered down into the room below, Cedric sealed the door behind us and thankfully muting the siren significantly.

The engine pit sank down below us for perhaps three decks where the wand now sat in perhaps twelve inches of water. If I remembered correctly, the engines which would have powered the propeller had been replaced with a massive rocket propellant system, similar to the ones that had powered the V2 rockets in the forties. It acted as both propulsion and steering while the magic kept it in the air.

We moved into the engine room more cautiously, both appreciating the unspoken concern that there may be more psychotic Russian wizards lurking in wait.

The stairs we needed to reach the floor above were on the other side of the Engine pit, which meant we needed to climb down and trek through the knee high water at the bottom.

Diggory took point this time, moving cautiously down the stairs with very little light to guide him. As he reached the midway point the crucifix around my neck and the one in my pocket burned red hot. I muffled a yell of pain and fell to one knee, clutching my thigh and trying to prise the searing metal away from it.

Just as I fell forward the wizard who'd been lurking in the shadows behind me jumped forward with a yell and went flying over my shoulder, his long serrated bayonet hissing narrowly past my right ear. He rolled straight over me and down the stairs, crashing into Diggory's back.

Before I could even react, three thunderous flashes of green light thundered into the pair of falling wizards and I could only watch in horror as Diggory collapsed into a lifeless heap at the bottom of the stairs.

A second later my wits came back to me and I conjured a block of granite in the path of another killing curse and swept to the side, avoiding the second that came through my defense right after it.

A flick of my wand transfigured the dead Russian into a wolf that leapt into the darkness where I assumed there was a wizard and died with a pathetic howl. It was enough to pinpoint one of my assailants though and a stream of curses forced him from his hiding place before a killing curse finished him.

I was only just quick enough to block a putrid yellow curse that thundered out of the darkness toward me and it distracted me for long enough that another wizard was able to tackle me around the waist and off my catwalk vantage point.

I turned in midair, using my back and the water to cushion my fall as much as possible. My attacker was not so lucky, his landing face first on a hard piece of metal piping exposed from the surface of the water. I couldn't help but wince as I heard his neck crack.

Water splashed to my right somewhere in the darkness as I rose to my feet and I instinctively tossed a curse in the direction of the noise; it was a mistake. A return curse from three feet to the right struck me in the side, splitting the skin and bloodying the water around me.

I staggered; gasping in pain and found myself face down in the water again, accidentally taking in a mouthful in my haste to catch my breath.

It was freezing, salty and tasted of oil and dirt. But it was enough to force me back to my feet and stay my spinning head. Another curse came at me from the darkness which I managed to dodge, sloshing through the water to avoid it.

As the sole of my boot came into contact with something submerged in the water I lost my footing again and more spellfire whistled narrowly overhead. I returned the curse the best I could from my hands and knees and then staggered upright again.

Another attacker closed in on me, the sound of his splashing in the water alerting me to his blindside attack. I turned just in time to seize him by the wrist and direct his knife away from me, sidestep his charge and throw him to the floor. A killing curse whistled past my head from the other side and I turned just in time to take a Russian laceration curse to my shield.

I simultaneously cast a counter attack and drew my sword from its sheath on my back with my left hand. The knife-bearing wizard came at me again and I was able to use the sword to parry his blade and immediately take his free hand off at the wrist.

I turned into him again as he fell to his knees, his mouth open in a silent scream of pain and neatly eviscerated him with my sword before using my wand to flick him in front of an incoming killing curse.

An unexpected disarming curse ripped my sword from my hand, though I managed to retain my wand by sheer reflexes. Another curse hit me simultaneously and I suddenly found myself suspended upside down in the air.

Undeterred I shielded the piercing curse that followed it and dispelled the bind, falling into the water with a splash that attracted a hail of spellfire from two directions.

A powerful downward sweep of my wand produced the Aegis shield; a vast, shimmering blue dodecahedron that would protect me from almost anything, but made me an easy target for experienced wizards.

Luckily, these two were not; while one continued an incessant stream of curses that ricocheted from the surface of the shield, the other paused for a moment, took stock of the situation and aimed a precise killing curse at me.

I waited until the last possible moment before dropping the shield and diving to the side. Both wizards could only stand in shock as they hit each other with their curses; one falling instantly from his companion's killing curse while the other one was battered to the ground by a bludgeoning curse.

I realised as I rose from the water again that the cut in my side was far worse than I had first thought. Blood was thickly clouding the water around me and it was getting harder and harder to focus on the task at hand.

Slowly and feeling slightly detached from reality I waded over to where Diggory's body bobbed slightly, with much splashing, I was just about able to lug him higher up the stairs where he lay draped like a ragdoll.

I paused for a moment to catch my breath and felt the combination of bloodloss and exhaustion kicking in. Just as I realised that there was no way I could possibly hope to take the bridge in this state, the entire ship began to shake as the guns on the underside of the ship began to fire, presumably raining death down upon Riga below.

"We did our best, Cedric."

Just as I was about to give up and collapse against the stairs, I felt a pair of strong hands seize the back of my jacket and turn me around. For a moment all I could see was the face of the Russian wizard I thought killed by his companion's bludgeoning curse, then he

punched me solidly in the face and I found myself knocked backward onto the stairs.

Again I felt myself pulled up right and again the fist struck me in the side of the head. I felt my nose break as my head bounced off the stair railing and blood seeped down my face. As the wizard lifted me again I hit him back with all of the force I could muster and he tumbled backward, landing a few stairs below me.

I aimed my wand at him, trying to steady my arm, but he came at me again, forcing my hand upward and dashing it painfully against the edge of a stair, jarring my arm. I tried to strike out again, but he took the blow against the side of his arm and punched me again.

A sudden surge of adrenaline shot through me, I decided right then that I was not going to die at the hands of some mediocre Russian wizard, not when I had a task to complete. I put my hand down below me, trying to find some leverage in order to push the wizard off me. Instead my palm came down on something sharp; the bayonet.

I seized it and with one fluid action, jammed it between the ribs of my assailant. He gave me an uncomprehending stare then as I pulled the bayonet free, he tried to escape, coughing piteously. I fell on him with a fury I'd never have expected from myself, allowing the blade to come down several times in his back as he screamed in pain.

Finally when he'd stopped moving, I stabbed the blade down once more for good measure and sank on top of him, gasping for breath, equal parts of adrenaline and fury still coursing through every fibre of my being.

Eventually I wrenched the bayonet free and jumped to the floor, soaked through with blood and water and twice wounded. I spread my arms wide and looked upwards to the catwalk above.

"Is that all you've got?"

There was no response and I looked around challengingly.

"Is that it?"

A vast figure appeared from the darkness and I suddenly wished I hadn't asked that question.

The abomination before me stood at roughly seven feet tall and the sight of it filled me sheer terror. Strips of tattered rotting muscle flexed against a rusting steel skeleton smeared with gore. Bulbous transparent veins of a silverish fluid hung loosely from it and swung as it moved.

Whatever face it possessed was hidden behind a thick black gasmask and where it should have had hands, there were only two huge steel claws that snapped menacingly as it approached.

I instinctively took two steps backwards as it came toward me, staining the water around it with the fluids seeping from its putrid flesh. I raised my wand, terror heightening my reflexes.

"Avada Kedvra!" I roared, fear colouring my voice.

The flash of green light burst from the end of my wand and struck the creature in the chest. It didn't react in the slightest, just continued forward at the same pace.

"Delibro! Abhorreo! Lacero! Sectumsempera!"

Each spell in turn did nothing to slow the relentless advance of the monster, even when once of the cutting curses severed a line of silver fluid, allowing it to pour freely into the water, the creature still came onward.

I backed away further and still it came toward me and the only thing I could think to do was run; I was just mentally preparing a route when the creature stopped. I stared blankly, unsure of how to react. Then it lifted a clawed arm toward me. I saw, with a jolt of horror, that attached to the back of the claw was the barrel of a vast cannon.

I managed to leap to safety as the weapon roared to life, peppering the wall behind me with what sounded like fifty calibre bullets. It turned slowly, tracking me with its fire as I pulled myself up and fled. Sparks from the hull's bulkhead and vast bursts of water followed inches behind me.

I threw myself over one of the steel platforms that would have once housed the engines of the ship and I could hear bullets ricochet off in the darkness. As suddenly as it had started, the shooting stopped and I heard the abomination begin its slow march toward me again.

Possibilities wracked through my brain; shields were out of the question. I could stop small arms fire with a personal shield, or perhaps a single round from that cannon, but consistent fire would cut through it like butter. Likewise, attacking it with magic appeared to do almost nothing.

And if I got too close, those huge bladed claws would snap me in half. As I was still frantically thinking, I heard it clamber on top of my temporary cover, its claws snapping experimentally and reacted purely on instinct.

"Accio Sword!" I roared and threw myself out from cover just as one of the huge claws came crashing down where I'd been only a moment before. I caught the sword in mid air and used the momentum it had built to spin in a perfect circle and bring the blade slicing down on the abomination.

I stared in astonishment as it perfectly parried the sword with its spare claw and casually punched the other into my chest, tossing me six feet backwards.

I fell face first into the water and rolled quickly to the side as a line of fifty calibre rounds splashed through the water where I'd just been lying. I rose to my feet and darted forward, ducking under another wild claw swing and slashing my sword at its legs.

Again I found myself blocked by another of those terrifying claws and this time received a kick in the throat for my efforts. I scrambled away gasping for breath and only just managed to avoid another blow that surely would have broken my spine.

As I rose again, a handful of rounds whizzed passed my head, penetrating the steel behind me. A half second later a geezer of fire erupted from the wall behind me and I dodged away. I realised a moment later that right behind that wall must be the rocket that powered the ship.

The abomination punched out at me and I ducked out of the way. The blades of its claws punching neat holes through the wall again, this time it took the full brunt of the fire across its arm. With a sound that was unmistakably a grunt of annoyance, it pulled itself free and turned to face me again.

I was ready.

As it turned, I swung my sword with both hands, the blade sinking four or five inches into the side of its head where it stuck fast. We both stood completely still facing each other, for a second I thought I'd killed it where it stood but then it did the impossible and brought a claw arcing into my side and tossing me through the air.

I clambered to my feet and staggered. I had wounds in both sides now and my ribs were clearly broken. I could only breathe in very short gasps and with every inhalation came stabbing pains. The abomination lumbered toward me again, the sword still sticking out of its head like some novelty prop.

"Accio Sword!" I cried again and winced as my ribs signalled their protest.

I caught the sword one handed this time, the other arm wrapped around my chest in a vain attempt to keep everything in roughly the same place. I could taste blood in my mouth every time I moved and felt my stomach preparing to vomit.

"Inilendio!" I roared and the Foe Hammer struck the creature in the side of the head. Liberally splattering the surrounding area in gore as the gas mask and half the monster's scalp came away. Not that it slowed it down in the slightest.

My legs collapsed underneath me as it came forward again, unwilling to hold my weight any longer. It stopped before me and I waited for the killing blow to come and when it didn't, I looked up into its face.

I almost gaped as the face of Franco Ritter stared blankly back at me. The German's once handsome face was ruined, partly by my blade, but mostly from the vast number of stitches holding it together. Where there had once been his shy smile there was just a gormless

expression, his eyes which I had closed in death were now open, yellowed and sightless.

Fury and disgust hit me simultaneously and with new determination I swung my sword around and stood in the same motion, impaling the monstrous face just under the chin. The sword buried itself in Ritter's head up to the hilt and protruded through the top of his skull. The abomination reeled back for a moment giving me time to escape.

From somewhere, at the point I'd looked into Ritter's face, a plan had come to me and I knew exactly what to do. My wand made short work of the wall behind me and my estimation had been correct, the rocket was housed behind it. I knew that the rocket was the ship's weak point, held in place only by a vast circular hinge that allowed it to steer.

I heard Ritter come at me again and I turned viciously, my first curse shearing a blade from his claw and the second forcing the claw through his chest. It staggered again.

Then, as though I'd practiced a hundred times before, I turned back to the rocket and fired a curse at the huge metal prong holding it in place. Three things happened simultaneously; I seized the Skitterdisc in my pocket, Ritter lifted his clawed arm to smite me and the rocket came away from its coupling and smashed through its casing and careened across the engine room, flattening Ritter on its way.

As I felt the Skitterleap take me again, I focused with all of the power left to me on not being splinched into a thousand pieces and it was gratefully that I hit solid ground and collapsed into a heap. I heard a cry from Hermione just before hundreds of thousands of gallons of liquid oxygen and hydrogen exploded a thousand feet above the city.

For the longest time, the world was silent and everything was still. The light fitting in the ceiling drifted in and out of focus. Dust seeped through a large crack that spanned the room and fell past my head.

Then slowly, with a painful whistling my hearing returned. The first thing I consciously heard were footsteps drawing closer. My vision swam for a moment and when it returned, I was looking up into my own face.

"I was right! I did look awful!" I said, in surprise.

My vision swam again and I knelt down to slap my face.

"That hurts," I moaned piteously.

"I know," I replied, not seeming to mind much.

"What's going on?" I murmured, almost drifting out of consciousness again.

"Not so fast," I replied and slapped my cheek again. "You've got to save the world first, then you can sleep."

"What?"

But I ignored my question, lifted my head and forced something over my neck.

"Two turns," I said, more to myself than to me. Then I reached down to whatever it was around my neck, paused and I gazed into my own eyes for a moment. "You've got to be here in two hours and get Hermione to give you two Skitterdiscs."

I was about to say that I didn't understand but the next thing I knew reality had dissolved away around me and I was flying backward.

I landed in a heap on the floor for the second time and heard an exclamation of alarm. I looked around and Hermione who was staring at me in uncomprehending shock. I was just about to say something to try and snap her out of it, when I heard familiar words from the adjacent room.

"There is something in the catacombs beneath Riga that we cannot allow Chernenko to get his hands on, at any cost."

Immediately I knew. I didn't know how, or why, but I knew what had happened and I knew that I couldn't be here for what was going to happen next. I looked imploringly to Hermione.

"Hide me," I pleaded. She just stared back. "Please."

"Harry, what's going on?"

"I just travelled through time."

"How? Why?"

"I don't know Hermione, but I know that if Cedric comes through that door and sees me, something really awful is going to happen. You've got to hide me."

She finally moved and exceedingly gently helped me up and through a second door into a storage cupboard. When she'd propped me against a wall, then pulled her wand free of her clothes and rolled up the sleeves of her shirt. I waved her away.

"In a moment you've got to go and send me and Diggory off on our mission. I need you to put this in my pocket."

I pulled the crucifix from around my neck and held it out, noting at the same time that there was something else strung around my neck. She hesitated.

"You're bleeding."

"It's mostly clotted now, go."

She lingered a moment longer before grabbing the crucifix out of my hand then disappeared back through the door, closing it solidly behind her. I pulled the other chain from around my neck and examined the small hourglass interestedly.

I assumed that this was what had brought me back in time, but what had I meant when I'd told myself to save the world? Where was I even supposed to go from here? I had to talk to Riddle, he'd know what to do.

Five minutes later Hermione returned looking slightly rosy cheeked. I suddenly realised why and grinned up at her.

"You just kissed me," I chuckled and she turned the colour of strawberries.

"How did you-?" she asked, breathlessly.

"We haven't changed anything, this is exactly what happened the first time. But don't change the subject; you kissed me!"

She blushed again. "You wanted me to put that crucifix in your pocket."

"Oh no, you did that when you hugged me. You just wanted to kiss me when you thought I wouldn't know."

She ignored me, but instead knelt to attend to my wounds, refusing to meet my eyes.

"Take your shirt off," she ordered.

"I thought you might say that," I laughed and she flushed again. I pulled my shirt over my head and we both winced as we saw the mess that was my chest. One side was slightly caved in where my ribs were broken but she mended that with a flick of her wand. The cut on the other hand was caked in dried blood and was probably infected.

It only took a few moments for her to clean away the blood and it immediately started bleeding again.

"Here," she said and pulled a small vial out of her pocket. Inside was a milky substance that she dabbed onto the wound. It almost instantly healed as I looked on in astonishment. "Phoenix tears," she explained. "Drink the rest of it."

I tipped the last of the vial down my throat and was amazed as I instantly felt rejuvenated. I leapt to my feet, evidently to the surprise of Hermione as she fell backward.

"Where are you going?" she demanded and I gave her a wink.

"To save the world," I announced and went in search of Riddle.

The others were still in the foyer, clearly going over their battle plan. When I appeared in the doorway, everyone looked up at me.

"Harry?" asked my father and Riddle simultaneously.

I sauntered over, feeling like the lord of creation and held out the tiny hourglass. Riddle stared at it in shock.

"Where did you get that?"

"I gave it to myself."

While everyone else stared on in obvious confusion, Riddle pulled the hourglass out of my hand, tossed it on the floor and stamped on it viciously. A small purple puff of smoke rose into the air and then dissipated.

"Was that-?" began Dolohov.

"Yes," replied Riddle, still looking me in the eyes with an expression bordering on wariness. "The airship?"

"It'll come down in two hours."

"And Diggory?"

"No."

He nodded and then looked back to the assembled group. "It would appear we've gained an extra man." They all started to speak at once, but Riddle held up a hand for silence. "The questions can wait until after we've dealt with Chernenko, the clock is ticking. Harry, stick close to your father and do everything he tells you. Let's move."

"Wait," I said suddenly, remembering. "I need two Skitterdiscs."

"What for?" asked Riddle suspiciously.

"No idea."

As it turned out the building we were currently in was part of the Vermanes Gardens and housed one of the entrances to the catacombs that ran beneath the city. So it was for this reason that a few minutes later I found myself walking through a low, narrow tunnel with two Skitterdiscs in my pocket and a broadsword attached to my back.

The sword was a gift from Dolohov, who apparently always carried spares and seeing as my own sword was vaporised in an explosion that hadn't even occurred yet, he'd been kind enough to give me a replacement.

As we walked, Riddle explained our objective.

"The artefact that I just destroyed is exactly what we're going to prevent Chernenko from stealing. It's called a timeturner and is the last of its kind, the knowledge required to fashion one died along with Albus Dumbledore almost fifty years ago."

"So why don't we just destroy it when we get there?"

"Because we already know we haven't, or you wouldn't be here. Anyway what happened on the ship?"

I tried to explain the best I could, with my father and Riddle cutting in every few minutes to ask questions. I deliberately didn't mention the crucifix, which was now hanging around my neck again, as I wasn't sure what to make of it myself.

By the time I'd finished, the small tunnel had widened out into a much larger one, which in turn opened into a vast circular chamber, with three other entrances of similar sizes. At the centre was a podium upon which rested the timeturner.

"What?" I asked in amazement. "That's everything guarding a priceless and incredibly powerful magical object; nothing?"

"I have been working on dismantling the defences on this tunnel for three days," said an elderly wizard scathingly in English tinged by an Italian accent.

"So it's going to take Chernenko three days to get here?" I asked, confused. The wizard shook his head in exasperation.

"Chernenko cannot be stopped by magical enchantments," he said, as though explaining it to a child. I suddenly realised what he meant. I was about to apologise when Riddle spoke up again.

"James; take Harry, Eichel and miss Chang and guard the left hand tunnel. Dolohov, Kaufmann, Martinez and Delgado, the far passage

if you would. Klaus, I'm going to need you to restore the enchantments on the tunnel we just passed through and guard it with Ahlstard, Silander and Sjoberg. Which leaves myself, Dustin, Rayne and Madame Marino guarding the right passage."

Cautiously, wands at the ready we advanced into our passage. Eichel, a cursebreaker began to cast a lumos charm, but I held my arm out to stop him.

"If you ignite your wand and there's someone at the end of this corridor, we'll be dead in about five seconds."

My father nodded approvingly and Chang winked at me.

"I always did find tacticians sexy," she whispered and giggled.

"Well then you'll love this," I said, coming to a stop as the passage narrowed. "Textbook ambush position here, let's see if our transfiguration master can't transfigure us some natural looking cover."

My father snorted and with two flicks of his wand produced a pair of chest high walls, in perfect replication of the architectural style of the chamber.

"Show off," I muttered.

We paired off and covered both sides of the passage between us, agreeing to keep noise to a minimum. My father joined me behind the left hand wall and although I wasn't especially pleased about that, it would be better than having Cho and her constant flirting.

After a moment of silence, my father leant in a little.

"I'm sorry about what I said before," he whispered.

"I'm over it."

"I don't think that it was your fault. It's just sometimes easier to have someone else to blame."

"It was my fault, if it wasn't for me, she'd still be alive."

"You were twelve."

"I knew enough magic to save her."

"That's not what I meant."

A silence fell between us that lasted a few minutes until my father spoke again.

"Harry, I had a lot of time to think in prison and reassess my choices," he flexed his neck slightly. "What I mean is, if you're willing and provided we survive this, can we try again? Life is too short for us to lose another four years."

Something inside me that had long been cold and dead suddenly blossomed back into life. I turned away from him to hide the smile that was spreading over my face.

"I'd like that," I said softly.

"Really?" he seemed more surprised than I was. "That's great, Harry. I don't think it'll be hard to pull strings and get you out of the army after everything that's happened in the last few weeks."

"I got promoted to Riddle's administrative staff. I can't imagine him being against me working from England."

My father frowned at this news and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Harry, I need you to listen very carefully to what I'm about to tell you," he said, in a far quieter whisper than he'd been using before so that I had to strain to hear him. "You cannot, under any circumstances, trust Riddle. He's a great man and like truly great men, he puts the needs of the many before anything else. He will not deliberately set out to harm you, but if circumstances ever required it, he would sacrifice you without a second thought. He is not a man who understands friendship in the same way as you or I."

I frowned, that was not my experience of Riddle, who'd put himself on the line a number of times to protect me. My father shook me slightly, his eyes serious and intent.

"I know what you're thinking Harry. He's done us a good service and deserves our loyalty, but he's a man of plans, cunning and complete altruism. That's a dangerous thing, Harry, trust me."

But I wasn't sure I could. It seemed far too convenient that my father would suddenly decide to mend our fractured relationship and then try and turn me against Riddle. So what was the purpose in his fishing for allies? What was my father planning?

"Harry, do you trust me?"

I didn't have time to answer. Without warning a figure burst through the mouth of the tunnel before us in a burst of bright blue flames.

All four of us leapt up to see a charred corpse collapse into dust. I trained my wand on it, on the off chance that it might get up and heal mortal wounds right before our eyes.

"Wait, they're using enchanted prisoners!" squeaked Eichel in panic. "Now they know exactly what to defend-"

He never got to finish the sentence, because a green killing curse thundered down the passage and hit him in the chest.

A moment later, the entire chamber had erupted into shouts and explosions. It appeared that we'd been attacked on four fronts at once.

Russian wizards began to pour through the passage before us, the first two immediately falling to killing curses from Cho and I. The next however blocked with a lump of stone and before we could respond, they were flooding through.

I blocked two curses and flattened three wizards with a bludgeoning curse. I drew my sword with my free hand and used it to cut down another as he tried to leap the barricade.

I managed to get another with a killing curse, before a hail of spellfire forced me to drop behind. A second later my father dropped down too.

"We're going to have to fall back a bit, or Cho's going to get overrun," I said as I thrust my sword up into the throat of another wizard trying to jump the barricade. He nodded his agreement.

We both leapt to our feet at the same time, dropping two Russians apiece and leaping the barricade. Our opponents clearly weren't expecting a counter attack because for a few moments confusion seemed to reign amongst them and this allowed us to kill another each.

"Fall back Cho!" I roared over the din.

"FALL BACK!" came Riddle's voice echoing through the entire chamber.

I dropped another Russian as he lunged forward, Dolohov's broadsword puncturing his stomach in a flash of steel. I hung back slightly, lashing out with my sword and absorbing two curses with a well timed shield in order to give Cho and my father enough time to fall back to the main chamber.

As we returned to the centre, the assault died out slightly, giving us time to reorganise. I couldn't help but notice as we all assembled again that our number was significantly smaller now and quiet a few were sporting wounds.

"I need a sword," shouted Silander, wiping blood from his forehead. "I lost mine inside someone."

Dolohov, who in comparison looked to have barely broken a sweat, drew his last spare and tossed it to him, hilt first. The Norwegian caught it deftly and we arranged in a loose circle around the pedestal. Riddle and my father conjuring huge stone blocks in a maze-like ring throughout the room.

"Casualties?" called out Marino.

"We lost Ahlstdard," shouted Klaus.

"Delegado," Dolohov said more quietly.

"And Eichel," I finished.

Ahlstard, Delegado and Eichel; that was three in less than five minutes. Things were already looking bad for us.

"Did anyone get a rough count?" asked Riddle, returning to the circle.

"Twenty, perhaps twenty-five in our tunnel," I estimated.

"That sounds about right," confirmed Dolohov.

"How did they get a hundred wizards inside Leipzig?" asked Silander, bitterly.

"We can ponder that one out later," snapped Riddle. "For now, let's try and stay alive."

"We killed maybe ten," said Cho. The others seemed to agree. For the three lost, we'd taken forty in retaliation, our carefully planned ambushes had taken their toll.

"What are they waiting for," cried Klaus angrily. He seemed to have taken the loss of Ahlstard personally.

"Relax Klaus," said Riddle quietly. "Don't let your feelings get carried away with you."

After a few moments of silence we spread out and took positions amongst the stone blocks. Cho joined me behind mine, for a few moments she said nothing then she turned to look at me.

"Kiss me," she said and I blinked owlshly at her.

"What?"

"It's stupid, but if I die, I don't want today to be kissless."

I didn't say anything for a moment, but regarded her placidly. Then slowly, leant forward.

They attacked again quarter of an hour later. This time they appeared to have learned from the first ambush and filled the outer passages with a thick, noxious smoke to conceal their advance. For a while there was nothing then suddenly and without warning, sixty wizards burst out of the smoke.

The stone blocks proved to be an incredible tactical advantage. For when the Russians emerged from the smoke they had nothing to aim at, forcing them to charge the thirty or so feet of open ground and allowing us to pick them off from behind cover.

They were perhaps ten feet away when I heard Riddle shout for us to open fire and instantly there were thirteen precise killing curses flung at the advancing enemy.

I managed to drop two before they reached me, then Cho and I fought back to back as wizards circled our block. I stabbed the first wizard to run past, but his speed forced the blade out of my hand.

Another darted around with a killing curse already on his lips, forcing me to block with a lump of conjured rock, forcing the wand motion into a block for his next spell. I simultaneously whipped out my free hand and caught him a vicious blow under the chin, giving me enough time to dispatch him with a cutting curse.

I retrieved my sword in time to parry a blow from a Russian wielding a hatchet and followed it up with a deadly bludgeoning curse that knocked him off his feet. Behind me, Cho fell under the weight of her opponent and I turned to dispatch him with a thrust of my sword.

Cho kicked him off and climbed to her feet. The battle around us was still raging, but there didn't seem to be any more wizards attacking us. I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her toward the centre of the circle.

"Come on," I cried as she resisted slightly.

As I reached the middle, I immediately saw Riddle making short work of the few who had made it through the outer perimeter. As we ran over he looked up with a smile.

"Going quite well, isn't it?" he asked, with more joviality than I could have mustered and then immediately ducked a killing curse from a wizard who burst through the circle of stones, a mad light in his eyes.

Riddle moved to curse him but far too slowly, I was just levelling my own wand when Riddle withdrew his wand hand and then spiked it forward in the blink of an eye, a curse exploding from his wand tip

and impaling his opponent who looked astonished. It was then that I recognised the feint and realised that I never wanted to go wand to wand with Riddle, he was incredible.

A few more of our group fell back to the middle; Dolohov, looking unflustered, then Marino and Silander. After a few minutes and to my great relief my father stepped out of the maze of stones followed by Klaus, Dustin and Rayne. There was still some fighting going on in one direction and Riddle quickly ordered Dolohov and Marino to go and help.

Dustin looked around wiping sweat from his eyes and grinned.

"They're not exactly what you'd call well trained, eh?" he said. "Not much fight in 'em."

Just as he said it, he was struck in the back by a killing curse and five more wizards leapt into the circle. I'd barely even moved by the time Riddle, Cho and my father who were closest had mopped them up. Riddle shook his head bitterly.

"Don't get overly confident, anyone here can kill and don't forget there's still-"

"Chernenko!" cried Dolohov from inside the maze. Riddle leapt forward at once.

"Harry, Chang, Rayne, guard this area with your lives. James, Silander, Klaus, with me."

They disappeared into the maze toward the direction of the fighting at once, leaving the three of us to surround the timeturner and keep a wary eye out.

A few moments later, I noticed the huge stone blocks vanishing around us. Conjured items tend to have a shelf life, the more simple they are and the better technique the conjurer has, the longer they last but even my father and Riddle had their limits.

Soon the battlefield was all but clear and we could see the bodies that littered the floor of the chamber, Cho gave a yell that turned me around and I saw Chernenko surrounded by a horde of

Acromantulas and appeared to be simultaneously duelling Dolohov, Riddle and Marino. There was no sign of my father.

I dashed forward into the fray, ignoring the cries of Cho and Rayne. Chernenko noted the commotion and turned to engage me his mouth open in a savage smile. I deflected his opening curse with a spry twist of my wand and returned in kind.

Chernenko took it in his stride, turning away from me momentarily to toss a curse into the unprotected chest of Marino, who'd strayed too close. She collapsed and disappeared under two Acromantulas.

A spider leapt at me and with a quick sidestep and thrust I impaled it on Dolohov's sword and then tossed both the spider and the sword to one side. Chernenko turned back to me, shielding two curses with lightning fast reflexes and tossing me like a ragdoll across the room with a flick of his wand.

Slowly, conscious of blood running down the side of my head, I rose from the ground to find that I'd landed upon the hatchet wielding Russian I'd landed on earlier. I picked up the axe and stumbled back toward the fray, to find that Chernenko's spiders had all been killed and he was managing to fend off Riddle, Dolohov, Cho and Rayne at the same time, laughing even.

As I came closer I waited for my chance and as Cho danced out of the way of a killing curse, I struck. I threw the hatchet toward him and tossed a killing curse after it. The hatchet lodged itself in Chernenko's back and the killing curse hit him in the back of the head. It didn't even faze him. He took a moment to kill Rayne and send him flying backwards into Cho, taking them both out of the game with the same spell before pulling the hatchet out of his back and tossing it at Riddle, who vaporised it.

I was just about to aim another curse at Chernenko when from one of the tunnels emerged a figure that stopped me dead in my tracks.

Alexi Chernenko glided into the chamber, there was no sign of any damage from the bullet Ledorf had fired through his skull. For a moment, I thought that it must have been a graze, to which we'd over reacted, but when I saw the boys lifeless yellow eyes I realised with a sickening lurch exactly what had happened.

Dolohov turned instinctively to meet the newcomer, his wand raised in a traditional duelling stance, but he stopped when he saw the child. I saw confusion cross the Czechoslovakian's face for a moment, before Alexi reached out and snapped his neck with an abrupt motion.

Riddle and Chernenko didn't even seem to register the interruption and instead focused solely on killing each other. For a moment I could only watch in amazement as they moved around each other, wands blazing. I saw now Chernenko's grace and realised the duel we'd had in Aluskne had been a joke to him.

Then I realised Alexi was moving toward the plinth at the centre of the room and I darted forward to intercept him, tossing a killing curse at his back.

It struck him with absolutely no affect at all, but he stopped nonetheless and turned to me, an unmistakeable sneer on his face. When our eyes met, my head filled for a moment with silent tortured screams and then he spoke in a voice that could not possibly have come from the child before me.

"Your magic is pathetic," it said, without moving its mouth. "Filthy mortal magic has no effect against the Devourer."

I ignored it and tossed two bludgeoning curses at it, they did absolutely nothing. The small form just stared at me, almost in pity. I seized a discarded sword from the floor and stepped forward. In one blisteringly quick motion, it smashed the sword from my hand and knocked me to the ground.

I rose again, but it had already turned back to the plinth. It didn't seem in a hurry, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. Then I remembered the Skitterdiscs. Instinctively I reached into my pocket and withdrew a disc. I knew that this would work though I couldn't say how I knew.

I threw the disc as powerfully and accurately as I could and for a moment, I thought I'd hit the small figure but it stepped casually out of the way. It glanced at the disc and then turned to me an expression of pure rage on its face.

"I knew it," I said, unable to prevent it slipping out of my mouth.

Chernenko and Riddle both paused in their duel to look at me and the small form of Alexi flew at me with incredible speed, knocking me to the ground. There was a flash of spellfire, a bang and then Riddle fell to the floor, unmoving.

I had no time to worry about him though as Alexi fell on top of me, his little hands digging into my throat. Just as I was sure was going to snap my neck, I felt the crucifix around my neck heat up. I screamed as it burnt my neck, but Alexi screamed as well, pulling his hands away and falling off me in pure agony.

I scrambled to my feet only to see Chernenko step over my wand on his way toward me. For a moment I was sure that I was dead, but from nowhere my father jumped forward to distract him and they began to duel.

I turned back to Alexi, who'd picked up a knife and was coming at me again. Just as he stepped in range, I pulled the crucifix from around my neck and held it out, he withdrew slightly and as he did, I darted forward, jamming the Skitterdisc into his chest and engaging it.

He stared at me in horror for a moment, before disappearing completely in a flash of brilliant white light and a shower of blood.

My father and Chernenko continued to duel; though there was now far less power in Chernenko's curses, his reflexes were much slower and the damage that my father inflicted on him didn't heal over. It had to end here. I stepped over, pausing only to remove Dolohov's sword from the acromantula I'd killed earlier.

I stepped up behind Chernenko and although he turned to attack me, I knocked his wand hand away with my empty one and plunged the sword into his gut. He stood for a moment, surprised, confused and defeated. Then fell to his knees and toppled over.

My father limped over and I realised now that blood was seeping down his leg. I seized him by the arm and we both fell to the floor, overcome with weariness. He looked around.

"Are we it?"

"Cho is over there, but unconscious, I think. Riddle-" I trailed off. I hadn't seen the curse that struck Riddle, I had no idea if it had been the killing curse or not.

"Well, we'd better check then, I suppose."

I stood up and helped him up too. We mended his leg between us and then for a moment, looked at each other, before stepping forward into the first hug we'd shared in nine years.

Epilogue

By the time summer had come, the world had forgotten our sacrifices in Riga; the lives we lost, the blood we shed in the service of our Emperor. As unstoppable as the tide the world moved on to thoughts of better things and the entire thing existed as nothing more than a fever nightmare that would forever haunt our memories.

It was to be expected of course, the official story had been all but obscured and instead the world was spoon fed a story of my fierce heroics in the face of overwhelming odds. I had to spend a few months playing the role of imperial hero, pandering to the elite of Europe and showing my face at all the events.

Then as surely as they forgot the tens of thousands of soldiers who fought and died in defence of Riga, they forgot me too.

I was glad though, no longer did I have to play the brave face, that of the war hero. Once again I could skulk at the dark end of bars and remember my fallen comrades in the redemption I found there.

It was the last day of August when I finally returned to Riga.

The softest rustle of a breeze disturbed the sun dappled long grass and nudged the knotted bows of the lime tree preceded a silence only broken by the faint gurgling of the stream and the whisper of the reeds.

Somewhere between the rich, sweet smell of honeysuckle and the acridic odour of fresh ashes hid the stench of death. Stretching for miles behind me were the graves of brave men, many of them empty. But for now I was content to look away and allow the brave man at my side to comfort me with his presence.

The beads of Ledorf's rosary lay cold against my clavicle; they hadn't warmed again since Riga, but somehow I felt protected wearing them. I turned to face Riddle and saw the concern his eyes.

"I'm fine, Tom," I assured him gently. "I promise."

"I'm glad."

We walked a few paces, from the shade of the olive tree and I smiled as the sun warmed my face.

"I posted the letter today," I said, trying to keep my voice clear of emotion. Riddle gave me another concerned glance.

"Ritter's letter?" He didn't wait for a response. "How do you feel?"

"I didn't say anything. I just posted the letter. I wouldn't burden his family with that."

Riddle nodded and turned to walk back toward the rows of marble markers. He stopped when he noticed I wasn't following.

"I don't think I'm ready Tom."

"If you're not ready today, you're never going to be."

"I suppose," I licked my lips and looked mournfully out at the thousands of graves. "My father wrote to me today, he wants me to help him reform the Order."

"Will you?"

"Probably."

"Is that wise?"

"Probably not." Riddle looked at me for a moment, as though he was going to reprimand me and then he shrugged and turned away. "Any news? It's been months."

"No, not a sign of the Black Hand, I doubt there will be, not for a while at least. All of our leads disappeared in the days after you killed Alexi."

Riddle, in fairness, immediately realised he'd said the wrong thing and reached out to grip me by the shoulder. It was comforting, but couldn't take away what I'd done. At least he hadn't said it.

"How's Fleur?" he asked, tactfully changing the subject. I smiled gratefully at him.

"Fine, good even. She's healed up perfectly. We're talking of engagement."

"That's marvellous," exclaimed Riddle happily. "You're a lucky man."

"Yeah, My father is pleased too."

"Pardon me for saying so, but you don't sound thrilled."

"No, I am," I said, half-heartedly. "She just, wasn't there. She doesn't understand. She doesn't say anything but I can tell she doesn't understand why this hurts so much."

We stood in silence for a moment longer and listened to the wind rustle in the leafy canopies and the twitter of the birds soaring playfully above. I thought, and not for the first time that day, that nobody should be happy on a day like this one.

"I killed Ledorf," I said finally and Riddle shifted slightly.

"I know," he said and there was no judgement there, which I thought was strange, then he sighed gently and patted me on the shoulder. "I should go, Harry."

"Thank you, Tom, for coming."

"Any time."

With that he was gone. Part of me, deep inside, was glad that he'd left me to walk these last few steps on my own. Because that was the way it had always been. The last few steps were always alone.

Sooner than I'd expected I was there and mournfully I knelt at the headstone and let my fingers trace the lettering in the sun-warmed marble.

'Alexi Chernenko'

The rosary hung on its chain resting against my chin as I bowed my head. Then the tears came fast and thick, not for Gina, but for everything that had happened since that first day in Riga.

"I wanted you to know," I said after a while, "That it was an accident. A mistake he paid penance for."

Slowly, I rose from the ground and straightened out. I felt old now and ached all over. There was a lump in my throat that I couldn't shake, but slowly I managed to walk away, turning my back on Riga forever.

I knew as I did that I was turning my back on all those that I'd lost on the journey here; not just on Ritter, Cedric, Thalburg, Boone and those who'd fought with me, but also on Chernenko, Alexi and Ledorf. Because they'd all been a part of this, swept up in the unstoppable unfolding events, just as I had.

As I turned my back on those names that had been forgotten to all but the pages of history books and the hearts of those who they'd affected, I knew that I was really turning my back on a part of me. The adolescent who'd gone to Riga in search of battle, bloodshed and eternal glory was gone forever.

And as I put this chapter of my life behind me forever, I couldn't help the feeling that in some ways, this was only the beginning.

Riddle had known it the first time he laid eyes on me and Chernenko had told me before I was ready.

Now I was finally coming to terms with it.

I was a born soldier.

End of Book I